

Katsura Izumi
Hinako Takanaga

The GUILTY vol. 2

Original Sin 原罪



Yaoi



Novel

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

Toya looked at Amano, the young man who was nearly inspirational with his cheerful, innocent, and mysterious youth. It was fair to say that the majority of people who wrote novels were gloomy characters, but there was none of that darkness in Amano. That uncanny cheerfulness no doubt contributed to the charm of his writing.

"Do you always stare at people that intensely, Mister Sakurai?"

Toya Sakurai is swimming in success after his work with the bestselling author Kai Hodaka, who is also Toya's secret lover. But with expectations so high, his company soon gives him a new project: find a fresh and exciting new author to work for Sozan Publishing. Toya is at a total loss until he comes across the energetic Yo Amano's inspiring debut novel. At first, everything is just business as Toya spends more and more time with the young and sexy new author. But Amano is bright and sensitive, and Toya finds his heart racing with excitement every time they work together.

What about Hodaka though? Toya's cruel and cold lover sees through Amano's charm and tries to reclaim Toya with his usual physical allure. Emotions run high in the second volume of *The Guilty*, where Toya learns it's never a good idea to mix business with pleasure.



NOVEL / DRAMA / ROMANCE

US \$8.95

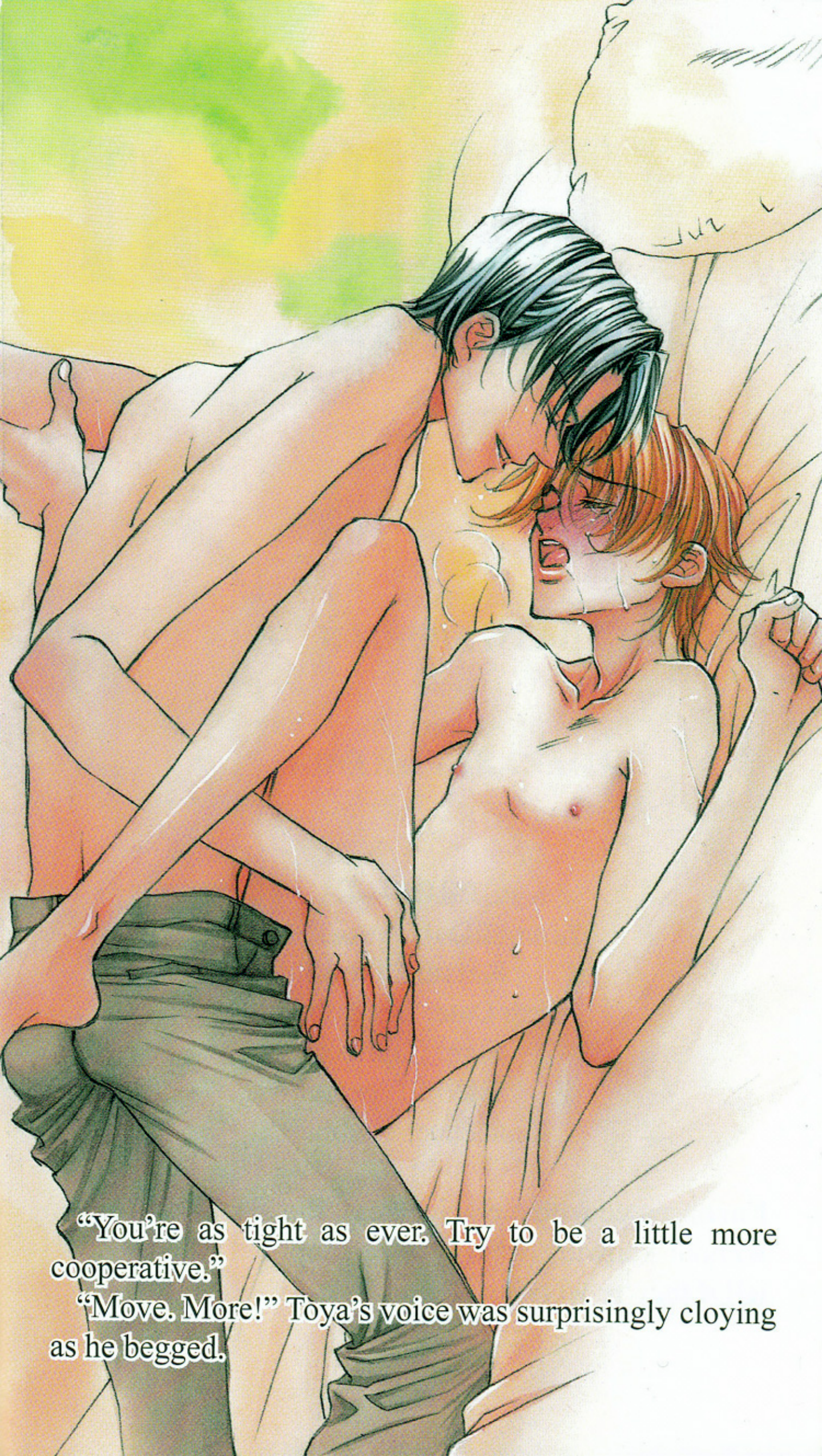
ISBN-13 978-1-56970-613-8



50895



9 781569 706138



“You’re as tight as ever. Try to be a little more cooperative.”

“Move. More!” Toya’s voice was surprisingly cloying as he begged.

The GUILTY^{vol. 2} *Original Sin* 原罪

Written by
KATSURA IZUMI

Illustrations by
HINAKO TAKANAGA

English translation by
Karen McGillicuddy

PROFILE

Katsura Izumi

Birth Date: December 24

Sign: Capricorn

Blood Type: A

Residence: Yokohama

I'm obsessed with medicinal teas. But since I drink them without knowing what they're supposed to do, I can't tell if they're working.

June
Los Angeles

THE GUILTY

Vol. 2 - Original Sin

THE GUILTY Vol.2 - Original Sin - GENZAI © KATSURA IZUMI 2005. Originally published in Japan in 2005 by Frontier Works Inc. All rights reserved. English translation copyright © 2009 by DIGITAL MANGA, Inc. All other material © 2009 by DIGITAL MANGA, Inc. All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the copyright holders. Any likeness of characters, places, and situations featured in this publication to actual persons (living or deceased), events, places, and situations are purely coincidental. All characters depicted in sexually explicit scenes in this publication are at least the age of consent or older. The JUNE logo is ™ of DIGITAL MANGA, Inc.

Written by Katsura Izumi
Illustrated by Hinako Takanaga
English translation by Karen McGillicuddy

English Edition Published by:
DIGITAL MANGA PUBLISHING
A division of DIGITAL MANGA, Inc.
1487 W 178th Street, Suite 300
Gardena, CA 90248
USA
www.dmpbooks.com
www.junemanga.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available Upon Request

First Edition: January 2009
ISBN-13: 978-1-56970-613-8
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada

The GUILTY vol. 2

Original Sin 原罪

Other novels published by
JUNÉ

Only The Ring Finger Knows vol.1
The Lonely Ring Finger

Don't Worry Mama

The Man Who Doesn't
Take Off His Clothes vol.1-2

Cold Sleep

Little Darling

Ai No Kusabi – The Space Between
Vol.1- Stranger

Sweet Admiration

Better Than A Dream

S vol. 1-3

Contents

The Guilty
9

The Guilty: Before Brunch
243

Postscript
255

Chapter One

“Hey, are the second editions ready?”

Toya Sakurai raised his head reflexively. With the staff meeting finally over, Makihara, the department's assistant editor, picked up one of the hardcover books resting on Toya's desk. The title was *Emergence*, and it had a gaudy cover design. Beneath the slogan Toya had thought up, there was the declaration: “More than 200,000 sold in the first month!” to help boost sales.

They were in the pulp imprint division of Sozan Publishing, and despite the fact that it was seven in the evening, the office was still bustling with life, everyone working away busily.

“Yes. Those are Mister Hodaka's review copies. I was just about to deliver them,” Toya said.

As Toya put the book in a paper bag printed with the Sozan Publishing logo, his thin lips curved into a smile. It was a huge hardcover book, more than 800 pages long. He wouldn't be able to bring Hodaka many, but a handful would suffice.

“Are you sure you want to carry such a heavy book there on foot? Why not mail them?”

“I'm not as weak as I look.”

Toya's skin was pale, and his facial features delicate, so people tended to treat him carefully. But he was a man, almost twenty-eight years old, and he wasn't

so frail that he couldn't carry a few books somewhere, even if they were hardcovers. Sometimes he just got fed up with the impression his appearance gave people.

"I guess. But you just got back from a trip to Kyoto yesterday. Aren't you tired?"

"I'm fine. And sorry about missing the meeting yesterday."

"It was just a staff meeting, it doesn't matter. So long as you got something hammered out for Mister Ichikura's new book, it's fine."

Toya worked for the Sozan Novels label, which published light fiction, mostly mysteries. Up until the previous year, Toya had worked for the literature and fiction imprint on the same floor. Though a single, flimsy partition separated the two departments, the atmospheres on either side differed strikingly.

Toya was a devoted fan of mysteries, but at first, the other editors had been worried whether or not he would be able to adapt to a department with such a sharp learning curve. Toya had swept those concerns away by the successful publication of a new book by Kai Hodaka, one of the authors he managed who was spectacularly popular. *Emergence* had been published in hardcover and was selling well. Three days after its release, the company decided to issue a second edition.

"I had no idea Kai Hodaka could write a story like this. I'm honestly impressed," Makiyara said.

"A lot of people have been telling me that. Is it really so incredible?"

"Don't you think that's why it's doing so well?"

Kai Hodaka's books sold so well that it was

tempting to add the prefix "super" to his title of best-selling author. His newest release was a mystery that hinged on a subtle twist, but there was also a prominent love story, which was unusual. None of Hodaka's previous works had concerned themselves with romance very much; that made *Emergence* distinctive.

The book was causing a sensation. Sozan Novels always included cut-out survey cards in their books, and a fair number of readers had filled them out. The department had even received phone calls lauding Hodaka's talent. As a result, Toya had been completely frazzled for the last two weeks. At a meeting before the book's release, some staff members had voiced their misgivings that the immense page count would turn some readers off, but it didn't keep the book from selling.

"How in the world did you get him to write that?"

"...Trade secret," Toya said, but in reality, he couldn't divulge the deal he had made with Hodaka to anyone.

"I know how well you did in your last department with serious literature authors," Makiyara said, "but I was still worried that you wouldn't adapt here. It looks like I was worried for nothing. I guess you really can't judge a book by its cover."

"But, sir—I wasn't the one who wrote the book. Mister Hodaka is a wonderful author."

Everyone at the company was cheering Toya's amazing feat, but in the end, Kai Hodaka was the one who had written the book. All Toya had done was anticipate his genius. Hodaka had chosen the subject

matter himself, started writing, and then turned the finished manuscript over to Toya. All Toya had done was monitor his schedule and make slight changes—the same thing that any editor would have done. All the attention he received seemed excessive and made him uncomfortable.

“But it was thanks to you that he started writing the book in the first place. I think Hodaka only managed to write something like this because he was working with you.”

Toya stiffened momentarily, but he was still competent enough to parry Makihara’s suggestion.

“All this flattery really isn’t necessary.”

“We’re just impatient for you to turn out the next big hit, Sakurai. We have to keep pushing the limits.”

“I’ll do my best, of course, but it’ll be impossible to get anything new from Mister Hodaka for the time being.”

“You’re right. Getting Hodaka’s next book in six months will still be worth celebrating.”

Toya had made it clear before that he disliked having the impossible asked of him, but it was starting to show in his voice and that frustrated him.

Last year, Toya would have been happy publishing Hodaka’s book by early or mid-summer. But there had been a sales slump in the department, so he had been asked to force Hodaka into a March deadline. Under normal circumstances, Toya would have only been just exchanging drafts with Hodaka by March, so the book had come in far ahead of the usual schedule. Because of that, they were in a very unique situation.

“The schedule says another book by September. Shouldn’t be a problem for you.”

“That’s impossible!”

Toya didn’t realize how loudly he was speaking. His coworkers all turned to look at him. Embarrassed, Toya shook his head stubbornly. They were talking about the best-selling author Kai Hodaka. He could knock out stories without much trouble, but if Sozan Publishing started asking for even more special treatment, he might just turn his back on them.

“I know, I know. It was only a joke. Don’t look so upset. You always get so worked up when we start talking about Hodaka,” Makihara snapped and Toya shut his mouth. “What I meant to say is that Mister Hodaka did this project for us as a special favor. We can’t expect him to do it again. The department’s official position is that September is impossible, anyway.” Makihara patted Toya on the shoulder with some kindness.

“The department’s official position? Did something happen at yesterday’s meeting?”

“Yes. Your mission is to get *something* for us this year. Go work your magic and you’ll still have six months to get a manuscript.”

Toya instantly began flipping through his mental calendar at the words “this year.” It was still a difficult request, but compared to September it seemed doable.

“All right, I’ll see if I can convince him.”

“Great. And there’s one other thing.”

Toya braced himself, amazed that there could be *more*.

“At the last meeting we also touched on the idea

to start publishing the work of one new author a month. So I was thinking, since you're not supervising a lot of authors right now, how would you like to dig up someone new?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"We'd like to groom an author who can start a series and work mainly for us."

"But our imprint already offers a new author award and nobody has won lately."

"That won't work. Our contributors are nothing special either: a bunch of small-time players. You're going to have to find someone notable."

What was Toya supposed to do when the department's own prize couldn't find the new authors they wanted and all he had was a vague order to "dig someone up?" But once Makiyara had issued orders, he wouldn't allow any excuses.

Toya would accept the project gratefully, like Makiyara was expecting him to, but he still felt a lot of pressure. If the author he got his hands on only wrote one book, his wonderful reputation would soon be forgotten.

"All right," Toya agreed. "But I have to be going."

"Tell Hodaka we're going to throw him a party when he breaks the one million mark."

"I will," Toya agreed.

They still had a long way to go before they hit one million, but *Emergence* had strong staying power. Anything they could imagine could become reality. Toya wanted to share Hodaka's dream.

The string of the bag Toya carried was biting into his hand. He had sacrificed much to win the weight of these books.

He climbed aboard a subway train and leaned back against the door. His eyes casually sweeping the compartment, Toya noticed that the ads hanging in the train were for *Emergence*, bearing a portrait of a brooding Hodaka. A pretty face couldn't write a novel, but while Hodaka's tightly written prose was obviously the basis of his popularity, his rare good looks definitely contributed to it.

When the good-looking mystery writer first debuted, Toya had been in college. That first encounter with Hodaka's writing had changed Toya's life. He had been studying at the economics department of a private university, following in his banker father's footsteps, and like all his friends, he'd had the vague ambition of working at some financial institution. But Toya had loved Hodaka's writing so deeply that he had become obsessed with doing *anything* that would bring him closer to it.

That was how he'd come to work at a publishing house. But even when his dream had come true and he was Hodaka's editor, his old enthusiasm lived on inside him, still alive.

Still, his first job with Hodaka, which produced *Emergence*, had been one challenge after another. Possessing talent, beauty, and popularity, Hodaka understood his readership well. He didn't like to litter his writing around indiscriminately, so he stuck to a policy of publishing only one book per year with each

publishing house he was affiliated with.

But the last quarter's results in Toya's department were terrible, so they had taken the only route open to them: getting a sure-fire hit out of Hodaka in order to stay afloat. Since Toya was an alumnus of the same college Hodaka had attended, it had fallen to him to negotiate the deal.

Toya had gone many times to ask Hodaka to write something, but Hodaka refused to write unless Toya put his own body on the negotiating table. It had all started when Hodaka invited Toya to play a game of pool. Toya had wagered Hodaka's finished manuscript, while Hodaka required Toya's body as his prize. Every time Hodaka won, Toya surrendered his body; every time Hodaka lost, he had to write twenty pages for the book. Toya had taken the gamble, clinging to a fragile hope for success, but he had no chance of winning against Hodaka, who was a pro-level player. That night, his body had been claimed for the first time. That was why Toya couldn't tell anyone how he had gotten Hodaka to write his new book.

Since that bet, though, Toya was in love. The mere thought of seeing his lover again soon made Toya's heart pound out of control and he almost forgot all about work.

Hodaka lived in a luxury condo near Hamarikyu, which was rumored to be worth several billion yen. His parents had both been wealthy and he had never wanted for anything in his life.

Trees were planted along the walkway that led to the building, the green of their leaves deepening with the

end of spring. Toya cut across the lawn to the entrance and dialed the number for Hodaka's apartment on the intercom panel. Hodaka had shown Toya how to unlock the door, but he was calling for business that day, not as a private person, so he wanted to follow the rules. No matter how close he got to Hodaka, he didn't want to mix the personal with the professional.

Strangely, Hodaka answered the call. Toya stated his name and business and Hodaka unlocked the door immediately.

Hodaka's apartment was on the fortieth floor. The view it commanded was magnificent. It was especially incredible at night, when it looked as if someone had overturned a box of jewels outside his window.

Toya got off the elevator and walked to Hodaka's door, taking several deep breaths. He rang the bell and a few moments later the door opened.

"Sir!"

Since Hodaka had answered the intercom, Toya had already prepared himself to see him. But face-to-face, Toya's eyes widened anyway. Usually, Hodaka's maid answered the door.

"Nice to see you, too," Hodaka murmured sarcastically, sending a thrill to Toya's groin. Hodaka commanded a great number of superb qualities, but first among them was his uncommonly beautiful voice. Toya thought he had prepared himself for it, but the sound of Hodaka's voice turned him to jelly.

"Sorry. You—surprised me."

"Whatever. Come in."

Toya went through the door, following Hodaka's

low voice and gazing at Hodaka's beautiful face under the fluorescent lights. His sloping eyes glistened onyx in the light, his sharp nose only deepening the shadows on his face. The man's thin lips were smiling, beautiful like those carved onto marble statues.

The word *beautiful* suited Hodaka, but there was nothing feminine about him. It was strange, since Toya's face, with its gentle, delicate contours, seemed more feminine. Moreover, while Toya's face seemed to have little or no importance to Hodaka, Toya was still fixated on his own appearance.

"Mister Sakurai?"

Addressed almost like a stranger, Toya finally remembered why he had gone there that day.

"Oh. Excuse me."

"I don't care if you stare at me, but do we have to stand in the doorway?"

Toya felt his cheeks burning, but he pushed those feelings aside and headed toward Hodaka's living room. The room had nothing in it but a sofa, a coffee table, and a small antique stand and shelves. It made the space seem much larger, but rather than looking bleak, the sparseness revealed Hodaka's refined taste. Above all, the living room had a view of Hamarikyu and the sea. Toya looked forward to seeing the night view of the city from the windows of the master bedroom and bathroom. It was an incredible location.

"Would you like anything to drink?" Hodaka asked, sitting next to Toya after he had taken a seat on the sofa.

"No, didn't I mention I made a reservation for us

at a restaurant? I'd like to go as soon as this is done."

"A dinner reservation?" Hodaka paused, trying to remember. Toya found his expression kind of cute. At times like these, he could almost forget that Hodaka was thirty-six.

"We didn't get together for the publication of your latest book, and now that the new edition has come so quickly, I want to celebrate. You cleared time on your schedule today to do this," Toya explained, smiling at Hodaka.

"Oh, that's right. What time is the reservation?" Hodaka's voice was serene, concealing a touch of arrogance, further obscured by a shocking allure. He was flaunting his sexiness, which Toya found hard to handle. But he wasn't planning on reacting to every single thing Hodaka did.

"Eight thirty."

Hodaka grunted. He didn't seem interested. Toya got a little nervous, wondering if he'd done something to put Hodaka in a bad mood.

"Here are your copies of the second edition," Toya said. "We've corrected all of the misprints you found."

"Thanks." Hodaka accepted the books and set them aside on the table indifferently. Normally, that would have been the point where Toya liked to discuss the schedule for the next book. But it was harder to bring the subject up than he'd expected, since Hodaka had already bent his policy to publish a book for them. But if Toya wasn't careful, Hodaka would make his plans with a different company.

Maybe Toya didn't deserve the luxury of asking

for such special treatment. He just wished that Hodaka would make it clear that Sozan Publishing would be the only company to get that special treatment. If he did that, then Toya would be able to relax.

"The reviews for *Emergence* are very good. They're saying you've broken new ground. I bet people are going to swamp you with requests for books in this style now," Toya said with a casual air, after much preparation.

"You're right. I've been getting requests for more stories like this lately." Hodaka was as serene as ever, so Toya couldn't get a read on what he was really thinking.

"Then you're going to be getting pretty busy soon, aren't you?"

"One hardcover is already scheduled for May. Other than that, I'm maintaining my one book a year per company pace. Same as always."

Great!

Toya let out a deep breath he had been holding, trying not to let Hodaka notice.

"Come here," Hodaka said and gestured slightly for Toya to come closer, as if he had spotted Toya's relief.

"What is it, sir?"

Hodaka chuckled at Toya's sudden caution. "I want a kiss as my reward."

"Your reward for what?"

The childish request wasn't like Hodaka.

"I worked hard, and all for you."

"Well...that was—"

Toya started to argue weakly, but when his eyes met Hodaka's direct gaze, he gave up. Hodaka flipped his internal switch effortlessly, changing from polite business to intimacy instantly. The reward was just an excuse. All Hodaka wanted was a kiss.

"All right, sir."

Toya stood in front of Hodaka and bent forward to brush his lips. He hoped that he could get away with that, but the kiss didn't satisfy Hodaka. He trapped Toya in his arms and pulled him down.

"Did you think that would be enough?" Hodaka rested a hand on Toya's cheek and gazed at him. Toya's thoughts scattered, as if he had been trapped in a spell. He drew closer to Hodaka's face once more and gently bit the man's upper lip. The kiss continued for several long moments as they tasted each other. Suddenly, Hodaka's tongue snaked out at Toya. Toya gasped in surprise. He tried to pull back, but Hodaka wouldn't allow it. He held his lover tightly as he locked his tongue with Toya's.

"Nngh—"

Hodaka held Toya's neck with his left hand and pulled his hips closer with his right. The room was shadowy with indirect light, and the wet sound of their kisses echoed indecently in the large room.

It soon became difficult to stand up and Toya knelt on the sofa where Hodaka sat. When he did, Hodaka's hand teasingly traced the line from Toya's hips to his butt.

"No—not now," Toya said, turning his face to one side, interrupting their kisses.

"Why not?" Hodaka asked petulantly, leisurely

stroking the soft folds of Toya's entrance through his clothes. Toya was caught hopelessly off-guard by the suddenly sexual implications of their conversation.

"I said you couldn't touch there!"

Toya's voice was already husky, broken by desire. With his cheeks flushed, he tried to push Hodaka away, but Hodaka started to rub Toya's groin roughly through his clothes, making Toya gasp.

"So excited already? You're as sensitive as ever."

Before meeting Hodaka, Toya had only the slightest interest in sex, so little that he had believed he didn't even feel sexual desire. Conversely, rumors about Hodaka's involvement with numerous women abounded. He had a great deal of experience and could break down Toya with only the lightest touch of his fingers.

It was Hodaka who had taught Toya how to enjoy a man's body. Toya's body was so horribly obedient to pleasure that even he found it scandalous. He wasn't any more perverted than most people; he just loved Hodaka. The only thing that made him react so strongly was his love for the man.

"Just stop it—ahh!" Toya tried to make Hodaka leave him alone, craning his body back as Hodaka slowly tickled his fingers over the cloth covering Toya's groin.

"No—stop..."

"Even though one little kiss made you this hard?"

Hodaka touched that part of Toya that had reacted so immediately through the cloth of his pants. Tears gathered in Toya's eyes. He couldn't even raise his legs since he was straddling Hodaka's knees. He didn't even

have the presence of mind to worry about it.

"No, I—no..."

"Then what do you want me to do?"

"We have to go...to the restaurant—"

Betraying his own argument, Toya searched for some part of Hodaka's body to cling to. He found no option but to wrap his arms around Hodaka's neck.

"That's true. But I didn't expect you to get this excited. I didn't how dirty you were."

Even as Hodaka spoke, he touched Toya's puckered bud with a fingertip. Toya hated him for it. Hodaka's touch made his flesh spasm, his hot, impatient caresses only driving Toya further.

"I mean, you don't really feel anything when I do that, do you?" Hodaka asked teasingly.

Toya was unable to answer Hodaka's mean-spirited interrogation. Sweat gathered on his forehead. His hard-on was pressed against Hodaka's belly and, without realizing it, Toya began rubbing against him. He soon became aware of his own indecency and struggled desperately to fight back his lewd desires.

"Nngh! Ah!"

As Hodaka stroked him through the oppressive layers of cloth, Toya imagined that he could hear that secret part of himself making a wet, sloppy sound.

Fluid welled up in anticipation, dripping onto Toya's body obscenely.

"Maybe we should get going, Toya."

Hodaka pushed gently against Toya's shoulders, as if trying to get him off his legs, but Toya tightened his arms instinctively around Hodaka's neck.

They had to go. He knew that, but his body wouldn't listen to him. Whenever he tried to move, that hardened part of his body rubbed against his clothes. The contact turned to passion and gathered in the pit of his stomach.

"What's wrong?"

Toya couldn't speak.

"I want to show everyone how dirty you are. Let's go."

Realizing that Hodaka wanted to molest him in public, Toya shook his head desperately. His hair was already stuck to the sweat on his forehead and temples and his body had been trembling with desire for some time.

"Come on, get up. We need to get ready."

"I-I can't go. Not anymore."

"But you're the one who suggested it," Hodaka whispered lewdly, gripping that part of Toya firmly. A wave of tension shot through Toya's body.

"Agh!"

The excitement that had built up in Toya's gut burst forth behind his eyes. Toya felt his clothes growing wet as he fell blearily against Hodaka. He wanted to apologize, but the shock stopped any sound from coming out of his mouth. Only his lips moved.

Stroking Toya's hair as he lay against him, Hodaka brought his lips close to Toya's ear and whispered, "Let's go to bed."

"Ah! Annggh! Mm!"

The king-size bed in the master bedroom was big, and although it accommodated the weight of their bodies, the springs still creaked loudly.

Hodaka had removed his shirt, and though he only bared his chest, it was a rare thing for Hodaka to expose his naked body so generously to Toya's view. Covered with slim, supple muscles, his body was so gorgeous that Toya was hypnotized by its beauty.

But he didn't have the luxury of being hypnotized then. Hodaka had stripped the clothes from Toya's body without even allowing him to shower. After such cruel treatment, Hodaka took Toya's erection, pulsing with excitement, into his mouth.

It felt good to have Hodaka's mouth moving over him, but Toya didn't like the idea of it very much. He thought he would die from the shame of making the person he loved do that to him.

"No—no, stop," Toya pleaded in a broken voice, but he knew that Hodaka wouldn't pay any attention to him. The warm, wetness of Hodaka's mouth covered Toya, the pleasure reducing Toya's mind and body to a useless puddle.

"Why? Look how wet you are."

Hodaka spread around the fluid that trickled from the tip of Toya's penis with his thumb and Toya gasped. The fine movements of Hodaka's tongue and fingers over his skin overwhelmed him and his hips began to tremble.

When Toya noticed his own indecency, he tried to regain control.

But when he lost that focus, he submitted, panting, to Hodaka's skill.

"The fact that you're dripping wet just proves how good it feels."

Yes, it felt good, but Toya was embarrassed to see himself that way. The anticipation welled out of Toya and rolled down his shaft, falling to moisten the pucker of flesh between his cheeks. He had to try and control himself a little. He wanted to, but it was impossible.

"Only bad boys like it this much."

Toya found Hodaka's indecent words arousing, and they ate away at his thoughts. At some point, Toya had relinquished the shame he felt at being manipulated. How could he be expected to withstand the pleasure given to him by the man he loved?

"Oh, sir—"

That throbbing part of him already wanted Hodaka, and he called out to his lover hazily, wet and twitching.

"What is it?"

"Come here," Toya whispered hesitantly.

Hodaka gazed at him, then raised his body and asked, "Where?"

The teasing in Hodaka's voice annoyed Toya, but he didn't have time to worry about that. "Here. Inside me."

"You're going fast today, aren't you?"

Hodaka was in no hurry, despite Toya's perverse and impatient begging. He stroked Toya's erection loosely as he taunted him. Toya had yet to see Hodaka lose his reserve.



"I-I've been waiting. A long time."

The truth was Toya had never pursued Hodaka with that kind of haste before. He was usually meek and level-headed. But laid out before Hodaka, that was all stripped away and Toya became nothing more than a beast.

It had been two weeks since they'd last slept together—such a short time, yet it had seemed unbearably long. There had even been nights when Toya was so overwhelmed by his desire for Hodaka that he had furtively satisfied himself. That was why he wanted to join with Hodaka so badly—as soon and as much as possible.

"Well, rushing won't do you any good," Hodaka declared. He pushed a slippery finger between Toya's cheeks, wet with lube. It made the penetration easier and Toya took the finger in, no longer feeling the pain as he had before.

"How—how come?"

"I don't want to hurt you." Hodaka paused and then whispered, "I'm not just being mean."

Toya still found it hard to trust Hodaka. But connected like that, Hodaka's fingers groping Toya's insides, he had no choice but to obey.

"Mmph—"

"It looks like this is too easy for you now."

Before Toya could take a breath, Hodaka inserted a second finger and gently slid it back and forth, evaluating Toya's readiness. Toya thought he could hold out just a little longer, but that minor stimulation forced shameless cries out of him.

"Nngh—ahh! Ah—!"

Toya was so excited he thought his brain would start sizzling. During the shallow stimulation of his entrance, he stood on the edge of so much more. Hodaka was only using his fingers, but as they explored inside Toya's obscene body, he quivered, reacting with instinctual urgency.

"Go deeper..."

"Not yet. Just be good a little longer."

Even when Hodaka hushed him, Toya interpreted it as cruelty. And as Hodaka pressed persistently against Toya's tender folds, despite his advice to be patient, Toya's mind filled with an intense white fog.

"No, I can't—nngh—ah!"

Toya's body convulsed and with only two fingers inside, he quickly succumbed to a pounding orgasm. Wiping the thick semen from Toya's supple skin, Hodaka looked surprised. "Are you feeling OK today?"

"I'm sorry." Toya was embarrassed by how excited he had allowed himself to become. But he still wanted Hodaka. "I-I want more, sir."

I want more, he repeated shyly, turning his face away. Part of him had been convulsing uncomfortably for a long time, searching impatiently for Hodaka, waiting for him to penetrate much deeper than a few fingers ever could and bring Toya unbearable pleasure. The very thought of it caused heat to bloom deep in Toya's body. He seemed easier to please than ever before.

"You're so cute," Hodaka said with a chuckle.

Hodaka brought his face close to Toya's, pressing a kiss onto his cheek. His tongue flicked the tip of Toya's

nose, brushed over his lips, and licked away the tears in the corners of his eyes.

“Tell me why you want me.”

“Please just...just go inside me.”

Toya felt almost no pressure, even in the core of his body. He just wanted to hold Hodaka close that night. Toya wanted to see, up close, that indecent moment when Hodaka, too, felt that lust.

Hodaka lifted Toya's slender legs without answering. He rested his hand lightly on Toya's thigh and something warm pressed against Toya's folds.

“Ah!”

The moment Hodaka pushed Toya's flesh apart, a choked off cry escaped him. Hodaka's heavy erection pushed steadily into Toya's body.

“Are you okay?”

Almost in tears from the sound of concern in Hodaka's voice, Toya nodded. It wasn't painful; no, it was so good he could barely stand it.

“Try to relax a little and I'll hit you where you like it best.”

“O-okay.”

Hodaka pushed harshly into the tight heat of Toya's flesh, invading ever deeper.

“Mmhh. A-ahh!”

“You can tell I'm all the way in now, can't you?”

“Nngh—yeah.”

Toya's body had awaited Hodaka so impatiently that it clung to him desperately. Toya knew he shouldn't do it. It was overwhelming. Just the thought of Hodaka being entirely inside him made Toya's heart burst with

tenderness and sorrow. Hodaka belonged to him. In that moment, Toya was the only one who could claim him.

“You're as tight as ever. Try to be a little more cooperative.”

“Move. More!” Toya's voice was surprisingly cloying as he begged. He wrapped his legs tightly around Hodaka's waist, pressing his wet and sticky organ determinedly against the other man's belly.

“Where'd you learn to beg like that?”

Hodaka's eyes glinted slightly as he gazed down at Toya. Swiping aside the bangs that stuck to Toya's sweaty forehead, Hodaka's cool lips pressed against his flaming skin.

“I-I don't know.”

“If you can give me a good answer, I'll be nice to you. I know you like it *here*.”

“Ah!”

The sensation of Hodaka wrenching ever deeper into Toya's body made a burning pleasure course into Toya's brain. Hodaka knew exactly how Toya would respond to everything he did. Such obscene arousal rendered Toya's mind a blank, barring all thought.

“I know you can answer me. Where did you learn to beg like that?” Hodaka looked down at Toya, quivering with the pleasure he'd brought him, and smiled with satisfaction.

“Just do that again!” Toya begged.

“If I do, will you be able to answer me?”

Hodaka pushed deep into Toya's body once again, filling Toya's heavy gasps with a new delight.

“It's good there, huh?”

“Y-yes! It’s so good!”

Toya’s mind was saturated—that pleasure filled it completely. As long as Hodaka could make him feel so good, Toya didn’t *need* anything else. He didn’t *want* anything else. He couldn’t *conceive* of anything else.

“Don’t ever stop,” Toya begged, sobbing. Tears welled up in his eyes without pause while his sweat made the sheets stick to his skin. Even that slight stimulation drove Toya wild.

“If that’s how you’re going to be...” Hodaka said.

“Aah!”

Had Hodaka abandoned his question? He thrust more savagely than ever into Toya’s body, making a loud slurping noise as he penetrated him. Toya was stretched to his limit as Hodaka squeezed into the tightest part of his body. Toya knew his body wasn’t meant to take in men, but when Hodaka pushed inside him, it drove Toya insane with pleasure. The place where they joined was feverish and Toya felt himself dripping away like honey.

“I-I’m coming again!”

“Then do it.”

Hodaka thrust against Toya roughly, dragging up yet another climax. Toya felt as if his body was squeezing out its last drops and there should be nothing left, but still he wasn’t satisfied. There could be nothing better than the warmth of Hodaka’s body to bury the loneliness Toya had felt in their long time apart.

“Do you want it inside?”

“Yes, yes.”

Toya’s muscles contracted. Hodaka muttered

something in a low voice and, at last, Toya felt that hot liquid slowly spreading throughout his body. When they broke the link between their bodies, the fluid that Toya had taken into himself began to dribble back out.

“Sir—”

Hodaka’s body covered Toya like a blanket as he held him. Toya looped his arms around Hodaka’s neck, burying his face in his shoulder, inhaling the scent of Hodaka’s sweat.

When they touched like that, Toya realized that Hodaka was a flesh and blood human being, just like him. Nothing could satisfy Toya more than being held by the man he loved. He wished that Hodaka’s heartbeat could override the rhythm of his own.

“Was something the matter with you today? You wanted so much attention.”

“Mm...maybe.” Toya propped his chin up with one hand and kissed Hodaka on the lips. At first it was light, barely sucking on his lips, but it grew deeper. “Just because you did such mean things to me.”

“I couldn’t help it. It’s been such a long time,” Hodaka whispered, nibbling on Toya’s earlobe as if it were a piece of candy. “Did you think I didn’t miss you?”

Hodaka’s words were a sweet poison and Toya felt himself turning to jelly when he heard them. Was that why Hodaka had been so sulky and mean: because all Toya had talked about was work? Toya never expected such a cute little quirk in an older man who seemed as perfect as Hodaka. But once he’d caught a glimpse of it, Toya couldn’t help but surrender.

“Then please—try and break me,” Toya whispered coyly, burying his face in Hodaka’s neck.

Chapter Two

“I don’t know what it is, but you look really worn out, Toya.”

Just as Toya was about to leave, the part-timer Yoshimi Fujiwara started talking to him. Toya jerked his head up at her observation, and then dug his nails into his palms.

“Uh, what?”

“You look pretty tired. I like my men a little broody, but you just look tired. Didn’t get much sleep last night?”

Yoshimi took care of a variety of miscellaneous tasks that made her indispensable to the department. She had been at her job a long time and talked to everyone very casually. Toya didn’t think she’d picked up on his relationship with Hodaka, but her sharp observation startled him.

“No, I stayed up all night reading. I’m going home early today to get some sleep.”

“You ought to go out on a date every once in a while. Don’t you get lonely?”

As soon as the word “date” was out of her mouth, Yoshimi started talking faster. Apparently she had remembered halfway through her thought that Toya had broken off his engagement only three months earlier.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have a girlfriend.”

"You should go to a mixer, then. I'm planning one soon."

"Thanks, but I think I'm going to hold off for now," Toya answered with a serene smile. He picked up his bag and started saying his goodbyes.

Toya's boss and coworkers thought that the wounds of his failed engagement still hadn't healed and that was the reason he didn't date. Really it was that when he took Hodaka into consideration, Toya felt strange announcing that he was seeing someone. Toya loved Hodaka more than anyone and that was why he wanted to let the relationship develop in secret.

As asexual and subdued as Toya had been, he had never expected to have fallen so deeply in love with anyone. He had expected to get married like everyone else and live an ordinary life. He had gotten engaged to a girl from his college club, Miwa Okamura, with that in mind. She had been level-headed and ordinary, and he had anticipated a happy life befitting them both.

But when Toya met Hodaka, everything changed. Toya just couldn't do it anymore. It would never work if he was under the sway of that eager passion. Toya pressed his lips tightly together, convinced of the fact.

The most important problem facing Toya then was improving his performance at work. Of course he was pleased with the success of *Emergence*, but Toya's abilities had no real effect on that. He had just gotten lucky. He wanted a real challenge for his talents next time. That was what he wanted most.

So he had to control himself and be more rational when he was with Hodaka.

Toya considered all that as he entered a large bookstore located near the office and, as if drawn by a magnet, walked toward the new fiction releases. The expansive store was full of office workers on their way home. Copies of *Emergence* were arranged in a prominent pile. As Toya watched, a young woman picked up a copy.

Swallowing thickly, he watched the scene, fixated. The woman was examining the books, trying to pick the best one possible. Then a hand appeared beside her: an old man had picked up one of the books and then walked away, full of purpose, to buy his own copy of *Emergence*.

It was moments like those when Toya felt pride in his work. And not just for Hodaka's book. There was nothing better than seeing people buy the books of the authors he worked with. He would have to tell Hodaka about it the next time he saw him. Toya was sure it would make him happy, too.

Lost in thought, without any of his usual attentiveness, Toya wandered into the young adult section of the store. Of course, he didn't think there would be anything impressive there, but the title of one of the books lined up on the shelf in front of him happened to catch his eye.

"Oh," Toya said aloud, receiving looks from the high school boys selecting their books. The letters on the book's spine caught Toya off guard.

Appearance.

The author's name was Yo Amano. The name sounded familiar, but unfortunately Toya couldn't

remember why. As if caught in a spell, Toya picked the book up. The illustration on the cover looked almost like a real piece of art, which was unusual for young adult fiction.

The author's profile was written on the inside flap, but the information was cold and uninteresting: birth date, current residence, and an interest in pool. But the title had a powerful tug on Toya's heart. The title 'appearance' was similar to Hodaka's book, 'emergence.'

The summary told Toya that the story was neither fantasy nor science fiction. It was more like a mystery novel. He was surprised to learn that the publisher carried other books like it. Toya became convinced there was some meaning in his find.

Suddenly, his cell phone began chirping to announce an incoming call. It was the sound he had chosen to play only when Hodaka called, so he knew who it was without even looking at the screen.

The high school boys glared at him again. With *Appearance* in hand, Toya went out to the main floor where he wouldn't attract attention.

"Hello, this is Sakurai."

"It's me."

Perhaps because Toya was hearing it over the phone, the impact of Hodaka's enthralling tenor was lessened, but it was still as gorgeous as ever.

"What can I do for you, sir?" Without meaning to, Toya drove straight to the point. He heard Hodaka's low chuckle on the other end of the line.

"I was thinking of going to Hayama tomorrow and

wondered if you wanted to come."

Hodaka had a mansion in Hayama. When his grandfather had rebuilt the family's home in the city, he couldn't bring himself to tear down the old building, so he had moved it to Hayama. It was a perfect example of just how astonishingly wealthy Hodaka's family was.

"You went to all the trouble of arranging dinner last night, and then I ruined it. I want to make it up to you."

Just the thought of what had happened made Toya's heart flutter with a mixture of shame and regret. He had gone to see Hodaka on business that night, but before he realized it Hodaka had distracted him and made him forget all about work. Toya knew it was useless to try and restrain his emotions, but he couldn't just let them go, either.

Makihara had even pressured Toya to ask Hodaka about another novel, just before he went to Hodaka's house, but he'd even forgotten to do that. Toya felt a powerful self-loathing at his surrender to debauchery.

Toya wanted to go to Hayama. He missed Hodaka, and the opportunity to forget about deadlines and just spend some time with him was tempting. But Toya's hesitation lasted only a moment before he put the brakes on his desire.

Before, Hodaka had insisted on keeping business and pleasure separate. Perhaps Hodaka was influenced by his new love and had lost sight of the fact that it was interfering with their work. There was also the possibility, even then, that Hodaka was testing him to decide if he was worthy of being his lover or not.

"Are you planning to stay only one night?" Toya asked.

"I want to take my time and enjoy it there. Are you too busy to go right now?"

"Yes. I'm very sorry, but I'm going to be busy with proofreading paperbacks for a while. And I think it might be awkward if I take any vacation days right now."

Conscious of other people's eyes on him, Toya spoke quietly, hiding between two bookshelves.

"I see," Hodaka responded with an easy casualness, trampling Toya's feelings, which wanted so badly for Hodaka to try and stop him. "Well, that's too bad. We'll do it some other time."

"Sorry for the trouble," Toya replied and hung up. He let out a long sigh. He wished he could have told Hodaka about what he had just seen, but it seemed impossible to chit-chat after turning down Hodaka's invitation.

Toya didn't want to pin all the blame on Hodaka, but he felt pathetic for being unable to act smooth around the other man. Toya was a productive member of society: work and love should be compatible.

Toya's rational mind tried its best to keep his heart under control, but it insisted on surrendering to love. With Hodaka as that object of love, Toya's rational mind had a very difficult task ahead of it.

"Hey, Sakurai. You're here early," Makihara

called out as Toya arrived at work, amazingly, for the first time that afternoon. Toya was in a wonderful mood and carried a rolled up magazine and a tall coffee cup with cappuccino in it. The smell of cinnamon began to permeate the office.

"You're just late, sir."

"How dare you talk to your boss like that! Anyway, how's it going with that thing we talked about?"

"That thing? Oh, you mean finding new authors?" Toya looked up from a document he'd been working on to smile at Makihara. It had been two weeks since their talk. The time had passed in a flash, lost in the crushing stress of work.

"Did you find anybody who looks promising?"

Toya was glad to be asked about that again. It was at least better than Makihara broaching the topic of Hodaka's next book.

"I made an appointment with a man named Yo Amano. Have you heard of him?"

"Amano, huh? I've never heard of him. What does he write?"

Toya wasn't surprised. Since Amano wasn't a major writer like Hodaka, it wasn't shocking that Makihara wouldn't know a freshly published author. So Toya handed Makihara the novel.

"It's got a good twist and his style is really easy to read," Toya said as Makihara leafed through the novel with interest. "It reminds me a little of the way Hodaka writes. The reviews I found online looked relatively good. At first I thought I'd heard his name somewhere before, but I was wrong."

"Online, huh? So he's already got a fan base?" Makihara snapped the book shut and looked at Toya dubiously.

"He might, but I'd still like to talk to him."

"But he's a novice, right? Does he have any contacts?"

"He runs his own website, so I sent him an e-mail. He replied immediately. We made plans to meet today."

Amano's website hadn't been very up-to-date, so Toya had tried e-mailing him. Luckily, Amano lived in the city and it had been easy to make an appointment.

"Well then, I look forward to hearing more."

Appearance had resonated with Toya much more deeply than he had expected. It had gone on sale three months earlier. The sales data he'd received showed that it wasn't selling spectacularly, but there was something unique about the writing. Toya believed that Amano had devoted fans, and if the company marketed him well, he could be a big success.

The imprint that had published Amano's first book had put him in the wrong category. If his books were beside other mysteries, they were sure to sell better. Amano focused on logical structure and detailed psychological descriptions in his writing; his work was much closer to real literature than pulp mystery stories, but his book still worked successfully as a mystery.

After becoming an editor, reading books had become inescapably intertwined with work and it was hard for Toya to read like a normal person. But Hodaka's *Emergence* and Amano's *Appearance* had both easily sucked Toya in as a casual reader. That was



why he wanted to meet Amano so much. What could he be like?

Heart racing, Toya finished his paperwork, reminded his authors of their deadlines, and did all his other little tasks. The hour of his meeting with Amano drew closer.

Yoshimi the part-timer called him at his extension and exclaimed, "Toya! There's someone at reception named Amano here to see you."

Toya thanked her. Amano was right on time.

Toya gathered a few reference copies of Sozan Publishing's books, including a copy of *Emergence*, then hurried to the elevators. It would take only moments to get to the front desk on the first floor, but Toya didn't want to keep Amano waiting.

There was a lounge on one side of the reception desk where employees could meet with guests. Most people waited in there. After first checking to make sure no one was standing at the desk, Toya peeked into the lounge.

There was only one person there: a young man sitting on the couch, flipping through a magazine without interest. He was a typical example of the attractive, modern youth, his short hair more blond than brown. He had several earrings and was startlingly well-dressed. It was a cliché thing to say, but he looked like a model or celebrity.

That man had to be Yo Amano.

The man looked more sensitive and ethereal than Toya had imagined. Toya had expected him to be a little older, but instead, he looked like a student. Toya couldn't

be sure that it was Amano. The young man could have been a model on his way to one of the men's magazine departments.

Agonizing over the problem, Toya decided he would ask the woman at the front desk where Amano was. But before he got a chance, the young man noticed Toya's blunt stare and looked up at him. He was much more handsome than Toya had initially thought, his eyes widening momentarily as he caught sight of Toya. A friendly smile came over his face and he stood up. Toya was surprised yet again to see how very tall the man was. He had a small head and good proportions, with the long arms and legs of a model.

Toya still couldn't decide if it was the person he was supposed to meet. Seeing his hesitation, the young man spoke up. "Are you Toya Sakurai from the pulp imprint?"

So the young man really was Amano. Despite Toya's surprise at that revelation, he kept his face carefully polite. "I am. And you must be Mister Amano."

"That's right. It's good to meet you."

Amano wasn't at all nervous talking to the person who would be his editor. He looked cheerful.

"Thank you for coming to talk with me today. Here's my card," Toya said and held out a business card.

Amano accepted it with an embarrassed smile. "I don't have any business cards, since I don't have a job title to put on them."

"That's all right."

“Your name is beautiful, Mister Sakurai. But it suits you, since you’re beautiful, too. I wasn’t expecting that.”

Toya had no idea how to respond to such an unabashed compliment from the young man he was meeting for the first time. He’d thought he detected a similarity to Hodaka in their writing styles, but perhaps they had other aspects of their personalities in common, as well. Amano didn’t have the protection of the intellectual reputation that Hodaka had acquired so naturally, but he seemed well-meaning and friendly.

“Oh! We only just met. I’m sorry,” Amano said.

“Not at all. There’s a café near here that serves very good coffee. Would you like to talk more in detail there?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Toya led the young man to the café, walking ahead of him as he examined the atrium and spacious lobby with fascination. Seizing a rare available table next to the window, they ordered café au lait and an original blend.

The coffee there was good, but they offered no pastries: only entrees like beef stew or shrimp pilaf. Despite that, the atmosphere was strangely relaxing. It was wonderful just to drink good coffee and take a few moments to breathe.

“Cutting right to the chase, I want to tell you that I read your novel, *Appearance*.”

“Thank you.” Amano looked up at Toya and eagerly pressed him for details. “What did you think?”

Toya was surprised by Amano’s intensity and

Amano suddenly looked worried.

“You didn’t like it?”

“No, it isn’t that. If I didn’t like it, I wouldn’t have bothered e-mailing you. I thought it was incredible. It sucked me in completely from the very first page.”

“Are you serious? That’s awesome! Thank you!”

Amano exclaimed, overjoyed.

“As I wrote in my e-mail, I was wondering if you would write something for my company, as well.” Toya sipped his café au lait, but winced at how hot it was.

“I love the books Sozan publishes. I’d love to.”

He’s so young, Toya thought, making himself sound so much older. It was just a first impression, but Amano seemed to overflow with a masculine enthusiasm much greater than Toya’s or Hodaka’s. Toya imagined that was why Amano didn’t come off as impolite and why Toya associated him with “today’s youth.”

“I thought you might like to see some of our books, so I brought these.”

“Is this one by Kai Hodaka?”

“Yes. That’s his newest, published just last month.”

Toya gave Amano several other samples, but he latched onto Hodaka’s. He picked the book up and rested his hand against the simple design on the cover. The movement of his fingers was almost loving. Toya realized that Amano felt a deep affection for the book.

“It’s such a good story,” he whispered, his eyes softening. “Kai Hodaka is so good at describing people. There was always something detached about his writing that seemed to keep the reader and characters at arm’s

length. But this time it was different. It was more impassioned and upbeat. Reading this book was the first time one of Kai Hodaka's books ever made me sad."

Amano was thinking out loud, his words clearly not intended for Toya.

"I was very fond of this story myself," Toya said. "Mister Hodaka did an incredible job with it."

Amano looked up, as if a bubble had popped. "Are you, uh, Mister Hodaka's editor, Mister Sakurai?"

"Yes. This book was the first project we worked on together."

"Wow!" Amano's excitement came from the heart. "Um, sorry. But it's so cool that you helped Kai Hodaka write this."

"Oh, I had nothing to do with it. Its existence is the sole result of Mister Hodaka's imagination," Toya said, trying to humbly decline Amano's praise, but the other man wouldn't let it go.

"No, it really is cool. I'm sorry my vocabulary is so limited. Can you believe I'm a writer?" Amano said self-consciously, before returning to his interrogation. "Did Mister Hodaka give you all the details of his plot or show you his manuscript before it was done?"

As a general rule, Toya didn't like to talk to writers about other authors, but it was the sort of thing that Hodaka himself had discussed in interviews. Toya knew how much he could say. "No, Mister Hodaka never sends anything but the completed draft."

"Do you tell him to make any changes?"

"We try to respect the worlds that Mister Hodaka creates, so we don't make any unnecessary changes, just

the parts that are a little dense or would be difficult for most readers. We always consult with him on those parts when we edit his stories."

Toya had intended to use the meeting with Amano to discuss the label he was currently working for and manuscript formatting, but somehow, completely by accident, the topic had shifted to the creative process of Hodaka's writing. The young man was a genuine fan of Kai Hodaka's. There was no doubt about that.

"The first time I made it through *Emergence*, I was so surprised. It was so far removed from Kai Hodaka's usual work," Amano said, smiling at Toya with disarming innocence.

"Are you a fan of Mister Hodaka's?"

"I love him! When I played soccer in college, I didn't read very much. But when I got hurt at a tournament and had to stay in the hospital, I had nothing to do with all my free time. My girlfriend at the time brought me his first novel."

After describing his first encounter with Hodaka's legion of books, Amano rambled excitedly about Hodaka's writing. His story was very similar to Toya's own and Toya quickly became absorbed, only murmuring to keep Amano talking. At that point, he had meant to be discussing Amano's own writing in more detail, but it would have been rude to interrupt, so Toya kept listening.

"I'm sorry. I've just been babbling about Hodaka."

"I don't mind. But I would like to talk a little bit about business, if we could."

"Sure thing." Amano became instantly accommodating.

"First, I need a plot summary of your story. Do you usually write summaries?"

"*Appearance* was my first book, so I don't really know much about how it all works."

"If you don't mind my asking, how did you get started in publishing?"

"One of the other students in my seminar class sometimes worked for the company who published *Appearance*. I ran into him while I was job hunting and I mentioned that I was writing a novel."

After a discouraging job hunt, Amano had begun writing in order to cheer himself up while he was enrolled in the Social Studies department of a private college in the city. He had gotten hooked by his own story and before he knew it, the novel was finished.

Amano had decided to go on to graduate school and quit his job search, but he felt it would have been a waste to neglect his novel. Since he had no way of judging the quality of his work, he brought it to his friend from the seminar to get a professional opinion about what to do with it.

"I think we would avoid a lot of problems if you asked your publisher whether they'll let you accept jobs with other companies." Toya wanted to avoid burdening himself with any unnecessary trouble. He chose his words with earnest care.

"But I think an outline of a simple story and its major characters would be fine for now. Since this is our first job together, I'd like to see what your story is

shaping up to be and then go from there."

Toya couldn't treat Amano the same way he did other authors since the young man had no practical experience. Amano understood that as well and nodded, his clear eyes focused on Toya.

"Can you get your editor to sign off on it, for diplomacy's sake? Some people don't appreciate the authors they discovered going off to work with other companies."

"Really? How does your company feel about that?"

"We only tolerate authors working with two other companies. But as long as they don't neglect their work with us, we see authors working elsewhere as a way to build their reputation."

Amano nodded thoughtfully. Toya watched him drain the last of his coffee then changed the subject. "Anyway, when your plot summary is done, can you fax or call to let me know? Or you can just e-mail it to me directly if you prefer."

"Okay," Amano smiled, his white teeth peeking out between his lips.

"Then let me say that I look forward to working with you."

"The pleasure is all mine, Mister Sakurai!" Amano exclaimed cheerfully, extending his hand to Toya with unpracticed grace. "I can't wait to get started."

Toya could hardly ignore the gesture; he grasped Amano's hand hesitantly and the man's gentle warmth enveloped him. Amano's hand was even warmer than Hodaka's, Toya thought dreamily.

Toya was early for his meeting with Hodaka, but didn't think it would be a problem. He gazed out the window of the taxi as he leaned against its vinyl-covered seats. He was pleased with the unexpected opportunity to spend some time alone with Hodaka. Though the feelings didn't show on his face, Toya was elated. If his coworkers could have seen him like that, his heart fluttering at the prospect of going out, they would have been shocked. The most typical description of Toya at work was that he was a good worker, but quiet and uninteresting.

If Hodaka wasn't too busy, Toya could invite him out somewhere. It wasn't even nine at night, so many restaurants would still be open. He remembered that there was a magazine in the office that listed all the best bars in town. He had flipped through it at some point, but never very carefully. All Toya could do was lament his inability to plan anything. He missed having conversations with Hodaka, but he didn't know where they could go to make that possible. He was left groping for ideas.

It was an undeniable fact that Toya had been caught in Hodaka's thrall, but he still didn't understand the man very well. In order to stay with Hodaka, Toya wanted to figure out a way to understand the man a little bit better. For that to happen, Toya needed time to talk to Hodaka, to build a history one conversation at a time.

For example, what had Hodaka been like as a child? If he told Toya stories about his formative years, perhaps Toya would be able to understand why Hodaka had such an insensitive and idiosyncratic personality,

which some had described as "morally bankrupt."

When Toya arrived at Hodaka's building, there was no driveway near the entrance for the taxi to pull into, so he had to go in through the service entrance in the basement. Toya took his change from the taxi driver, and then walked into the basement lobby.

The luxury of the building was flawless in every detail. It made the breath of a commoner like Toya catch in the throat. Crossing the floor that reflected his image, Toya's footsteps echoed strangely. The place was like a hotel. Toya hurried to the elevators with that image in his mind, and then stopped suddenly. Hodaka was standing there.

If Hodaka had been alone, Toya would have called out to him. But he wasn't alone. There was a middle-aged man and a young woman with him. Toya thought he recognized the man from somewhere, but he couldn't remember where.

Toya didn't know what was going on, but he preferred not to be seen. As his eyes scoured the room for a place to hide, Toya noticed the paper bag the woman was holding with the logo "Six Winds," printed on it.

Six Winds was the name of a mid-sized publisher that focused on mystery novels, much like Sozan Publishing. Hodaka had written several books for them. Toya must have recognized the middle-aged man from a party.

"Thank you for seeing us today, sir." Toya heard them saying their goodbyes. He tried to get away, but it was too late. The group came straight toward Toya and he missed his opportunity to leave. The woman was

dainty and she bowed her head to Toya. Toya returned her polite greeting.

"Mister Sakurai." Hodaka smiled at Toya, giving a flawless performance of detachment.

"I'm sorry, Mister Hodaka. It looks like I'm early. I hope I didn't interrupt."

"No, they were just on their way out."

The two others looked at Toya a bit suspiciously, but they gave quick, polite bows and hurried away.

"Which company do they work for?"

"That was the new editor from Six Winds," Hodaka answered without hesitation.

"The man?" Toya asked, acting as naturally as he could to avoid suspicion.

"No, the young woman," Hodaka replied coolly.

Toya was shocked.

What does that mean?

It felt as if a cold fist had closed around his heart. Toya dug his nails into his palms, stumbling under the intense sensation.

"They wanted to wrap up their staff transfer as quickly as possible, so we had a quick meeting. I'm glad we finished on time."

"Oh. I see." Toya's nails bit even deeper into his hands, fighting against the bitterness that was slowly expanding through his heart.

"Is something the matter?"

"No. So then you've already eaten?"

"Oh, yes. But if you're hungry I can have something prepared for you."

"No, it's fine."

Hodaka's words implied that the maid was still there, so Toya shook his head and followed Hodaka into the elevator. After pushing the button for the fortieth floor, Hodaka looked at Toya, his lips twisting ever so slightly.

"I can offer you something else for dessert." His voice was teasing as he pressed against Toya's back, gently wrapping his arms around Toya to whisper in his ear.

"Sir—not here."

"You don't want it?"

"If someone sees us, it could be bad for you," Toya said, trying to sound as cold as possible.

"You're so mean," Hodaka murmured against his ear. "I don't care if anyone sees us."

"But—"

The restraint of Hodaka's arms was so sweetly heartrending that Toya almost forgot to slip out of them.

"There are security cameras in here, you know. And they've seen plenty already."

"What?!"

Toya shoved Hodaka off of him with all his strength. Watching Toya get his breathing under control, Hodaka chuckled in amusement. "You're still a coward, no matter how excited you get."

"You push things too far, sir."

Toya simply could not accept doing *that* in public.

"No, I don't. I just don't hold myself back."

"What does that mean?"

Before Hodaka could answer though, the elevator arrived at the fortieth floor. Hodaka walked down the

hallway ahead of Toya and opened the door to his apartment. He went in first. Toya started to follow him, but Hodaka grabbed his arm tightly.

"Hey!"

Toya stumbled and fell against Hodaka's chest. Hodaka held him, whispering erotically against his ear, "Is this better for you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Am I allowed to kiss you now?"

Hodaka held Toya's chin, forcing Toya to look up at him. Toya frowned. But when he tried to speak, his lips were sealed with the perfect familiarity of Hodaka's.

"I told you I hate having to hold myself back. How long do you want to keep me waiting?" Hodaka murmured between their kisses.

But Toya had no time to answer. The kisses came in a constant barrage, deep enough to make his fingers numb, deep enough that he forgot to breathe. Toya dug his nails into Hodaka's arms.

"That hurts," the man laughed. He stimulated the interior of Toya's mouth, his saliva welling up. "Toya, if you keep hurting me, I'm going to punish you."

"But—" Toya shook his head. His back was pressed against Hodaka's shoe cabinet. Despite the pain in his arms, Hodaka didn't let Toya go.

"But what?"

"The maid might see us."

"Are you hoping she will? That's so dirty."

Toya struggled against being swept up in his passion, but Hodaka held his arms down and pressed his lips against Toya's temple. Toya was intoxicated by the

gentleness of the kiss. He felt dizzy. "Sir—"

As if it had come to steal his words from him, Hodaka's tongue snaked into the narrow crack between Toya's lightly sealed lips. The immediacy of Hodaka's forceful tongue overwhelmed Toya. He thought his body was coming apart. He had no choice but to surrender, so Toya wrapped his arms around Hodaka's back.

"This is terrible," Toya mumbled, squinting at his notes. The schedule for all his upcoming projects was written down in detail, but the band of authors he had started managing at the beginning of the month were no good. All of their projects were remarkably behind schedule.

When Toya was still new to the department, Makihara had been king and given him comparatively good authors. But that kind of indulgence was no longer acceptable. Toya preferred to be treated like everyone else anyway.

He picked up the phone with determination and called one of the authors who was far behind schedule. All he got was an answering machine.

"Hello, I'm not home right now. Please leave a message after the beep."

"This is Sakurai from Sozan Publishing. I'm calling to see how you're doing with our current project. I'll try again later," he said and hung up.

But that was all his coworker Yoshikawa needed to start laughing. "Was that Takashima?"

“Yeah. I can never get a hold of him. It’s frustrating.”

Yoshikawa nodded understandingly. “As soon as Takashima hits a wall on a manuscript, he disappears. Haven’t you heard about him?”

“You mean that’s true? They weren’t joking?”

The more impossible the situation got for Takashima, the higher the probability was that he would bolt. It was a famous rumor. But Toya had never really believed it. It *had* to be just a rumor.

“You bet it’s true. Ishida, his last editor, had a lot of trouble with him. He got results, but they were always late. The printers always take really long, too, so you better schedule a couple of days of cushion for him.”

“I didn’t know that. Thanks.”

Toya had thought it was so hard to get a hold of Takashima because he was busy. When he’d gone to meet Takashima for the staff change, he had seemed very humble and serious. Toya couldn’t imagine that he would abandon a manuscript and disappear.

Then again, if Takashima found it impossible to make progress, then the constant harassment of an editor would probably only drive him into hiding. Toya could understand the psychology of an author who would ignore the phone or even flee his home.

“He’s working on a short story collection this time, right? We’ve already set the publication line-up and made it public, so you can’t drop him.”

“That is a problem. What am I going to do?” Toya sighed.

Sozan Novels, the main imprint of the pulp fiction

department at Sozan Publishing, was turning fifteen that year. To celebrate, they were sponsoring raffles and publishing collections from writing competitions by popular authors. The parade of official events would begin early in the spring. Once the publicity went out, it was difficult to drop a project, so people in the department were even more cutthroat than usual. But no matter how busy Toya was, he couldn’t eliminate the time he spent with Hodaka. He couldn’t stop his heart from missing him.

The night before, it had been nearly one in the morning when Toya got to Hodaka’s apartment after work. He would have been happy just to see Hodaka and to talk for a little while, but as the moments passed, they wound up having sex.

It was a normal for lovers to yearn to feel each other’s warmth and skin. In fact, when Toya took Hodaka inside himself and his tight flesh wrapped around Hodaka, he lost himself completely in the act. But eventually it had to be more than just sex. Toya wanted to have frivolous conversations with Hodaka, like normal people. He wanted to go out with Hodaka somewhere where no one would notice them.

Toya was always the one to feel Hodaka’s absence, never the other way around. The only time Hodaka had ever made an excuse to see Toya was when he’d recently invited him to go to Hayama. Toya had turned it down because he had to work, but Hodaka had never repeated the offer.

All Toya wanted was to have more relaxing time to spend with Hodaka. But whenever he was with

Hodaka, the heat of his body became the top priority. The peaceful hours that Toya wanted, when he could feel completely satisfied just being with his lover, were obviously not what Hodaka wanted. Sometimes Toya suspected that all Hodaka wanted was his body. There was no point in suggesting that there were thousands of other people better suited than Toya, but he still suspected that Hodaka valued nothing about him except his body.

Toya had trouble believing what an obscene animal he became in bed. When he was in Hodaka's arms, he said things that he never would have dreamt of. Toya pursued Hodaka tirelessly. But then again, maybe it was selfish of him to want Hodaka to fill his heart as well as his body.

I miss you.

He held back the passion that threatened to gush out, biting hard on his lip. Where did those emotions keep coming from? Toya was at work, but still, the moment he thought about Hodaka, he was powerless to stop his feelings.

Toya knew that wasn't what he was supposed to be doing. He had work to do. If he didn't get all his authors working, it would only end up causing problems for everyone involved. But he wondered if Hodaka had turned his back on him in shock at how easily Toya was sucked under his spell. Before Toya and Hodaka had been lovers, they had been autonomous individuals who worked together. There were certain rules between them that needed to be respected. And there was no reason he should be thinking exclusively about Hodaka so much.

"Okay!" Toya slammed his notebook shut and brought his mind back to the work at hand. He had faxed Takashima, his biggest headache, to find out about the status of his project, but since it didn't look like he was going to answer, Toya tried e-mailing him. When he opened his e-mail program and checked his new mail, there were some messages from a few of the authors he was working with mixed in with the company memos and spam.

Two of them were writing to say their projects would be late. One had sent a list of possible titles that Toya had requested. Glancing over the list of suggestions, Toya drummed his fingers on his desk: nothing really inspired him, so he asked for another list.

"Do you want some coffee, Toya?"

Toya looked up as the part-timer Yoshimi spoke to him.

"Oh, don't worry about it. I can get my own."

"I'm going over there anyway. I only asked because you look worn out."

"I'm fine."

Toya stood up from his desk and walked to the break room with Yoshimi. As they stood in front of the coffee pot, she inclined her head slightly and looked over at him.

"Your forehead is all wrinkled. I can count the grooves, they're so deep. It's a waste of a pretty face." Yoshimi pointed out the lines to Toya.

"It's just one of those days."

"You shouldn't push yourself too hard just because Kai Hodaka's book sold so well."

"It's not that."

"I thought maybe you'd gotten yourself a new girlfriend. You looked like you were lapsing into your old habits lately."

"You're overanalyzing me." Toya's mouth twisted into a faint smile to Yoshimi's insightful word. He picked up the coffee cup he kept at the office, scooped in some instant coffee and then poured hot water into it from the pot.

"Secretive as ever."

"It's not a secret if I don't have anything to tell you."

For no reason in particular, the image of Hodaka's new editor at Six Winds superimposed itself over Yoshimi. The woman had been cute. She wasn't striking, but her purity would definitely appeal to men. Toya even wondered if that was how Hodaka chose his editors.

You're being stupid.

A bitter feeling rose in his heart. It had to be jealousy. And ever since he'd first noticed it, it had been imperceptibly weaving into the fabric of his heart. He knew it was foolish to get jealous just because someone was getting close to Hodaka. He hated himself for being so petty and undignified.

"You can talk to me if you need to, you know. About anything."

"Thanks," Toya said, but he didn't intend to talk to Yoshimi. All he could do was accept her kindness with grace and good humor. It would be nice to be able to talk to someone, but Toya couldn't abandon everything he'd built up because he was wrapped up in an once-in-

a-lifetime love affair.

Toya had his own life, before he met Hodaka and also after. That life would continue. He couldn't get so rash that he threw away everything just to be dragged into a momentary love, as vivid and fleeting as fireworks.

Chapter Three

“What’s up, Sakurai? You look depressed. You’re not drinking very much,” Makihara said.

“Oh, it’s not that,” Toya answered shyly, bringing his wine glass to his lips.

Sometimes when their weekly meetings ended early, those without work to do went out for drinks. Yoshikawa and the others who sat beside Toya had been heatedly debating the new proofreader for some time.

“But when I asked him if *choke* or *strangle* sounded better, he didn’t know!”

“Well, how should he know if he’s not used to working on mysteries? He’s not going to know the difference between choking and strangling right off the bat.”

The discussion was extremely rowdy, but it was only the alcohol that made them shout at each other. Toya smirked to himself, glad that they weren’t bothering the other customers.

“Hey, I heard they’re reprinting 300,000 copies of *Emergence*!”

Makihara had charged Toya with the mission of retrieving the manuscript for *Emergence* with the explicit intention of pulling the pulp imprint out of the red. But sales were even better than they’d anticipated: they could bury the deficit and still have money left over.

It was early May, only a little more than one month after *Emergence* had gone on sale, and it was still dominating the best seller lists.

"The sales department really pulled together to help us out. The pace has dropped off, but it's still moving fast."

"If we could get a movie deal for it, it would sell even better."

"Don't you think it would be hard to make into a movie? It's got such an unusual atmosphere," Toya observed.

One of his coworkers pushed a wooden salad bowl over to him, interrupting. "Try this. When are you meeting to talk to Hodaka about his next book?"

Toya picked up some of the lettuce and shredded radish, heaping it on his own plate. "Um—well, I thought I'd get started on the details soon."

Toya was being so evasive because he still hadn't broached the subject with Hodaka. Their dates usually led automatically to sex, so Toya had been unable to discuss anything with Hodaka. He felt nothing but irritation with himself.

"Well, I'm sure you'll manage."

"Thank you," Toya replied with perfunctory politeness. "But I should get going."

When the drinking excursions got to that point, they bogged down and never seemed to end.

"Oh, look at the time! All right, we'll let you go," Makiyara nodded.

Toya left the party a little after eleven, so he made it home before midnight.

"Oof," Toya sighed, throwing himself onto his bed. He felt like his fatigue kept building a little bit more every day. The real problem was that Makiyara's expectation of "the next big hit" was weighing on Toya.

Toya didn't know what was going to sell; no one did. That was why all the editors did their projects with a trial and error method. There were always books that didn't sell and always books that did. The criteria for what would sell and what was good in the pulp division were strikingly different from Toya's previous department, which focused on more literary justifications for its publications.

Toya was glad that Makiyara trusted him, and he wanted to live up to those expectations, but that didn't mean he could pull off a job that was beyond his power. The more diligently Toya did his job, the bigger the goals grew and the more intense the pressure became.

If only Hodaka would indulge him a little bit. Toya needed someone with whom he could share the anxiety he felt. He didn't want comfort and advice; he just wanted someone to let him talk. If Toya could just say what he felt, he would be able to organize his feelings and then the energy to do his job would come back.

Toya doubted that Hodaka wanted to hear him gripe about work and it was pointless to expect him to. If Toya dragged the depressing influence of business into their time together, Hodaka would scorn him as someone who couldn't keep his professional and personal lives separate.

"I'm exhausted."

For several days, Toya had only been coming back to his studio apartment to sleep. His relationship with Hodaka even spurred that tendency. Whenever he stayed the night at Hodaka's apartment, he would often come home the next morning to change, and then go straight to work.

Toya had a reason for spending all his time at Hodaka's. Toya liked his apartment well enough, and he didn't have any insecurities about it that prevented him from inviting Hodaka over, even though the man lived in a luxury condominium. It was just that the plaster walls of his apartment were thin, and if he made noise, his neighbors would hear it.

It had been fine with his last lover—his ex-fiancée Miwa Okamura. She wasn't a very passionate person and Toya had believed himself to be nearly asexual. He had invited Miwa over because even if they started fooling around, they had never once lost control of themselves and made any noise. But with Hodaka, Toya couldn't control himself. If his neighbors discovered what was going on, it was almost certain that rumors would start.

Hodaka was a popular author: everyone knew who he was. *Emergence* had been such a success that people were even talking about making it into a movie. Toya, on the other hand, had depended on Hodaka's popularity to make his last project a success. He hadn't done anything to keep the success coming, though.

Toya was only an editor and Hodaka was an author blazing with talent. Many readers were breathlessly eager for his next work, and his other publishers were

vigilant for their opportunity to get a manuscript.

People would begin to find it strange that Hodaka preferred to work with an editor like Toya if he couldn't keep up his performance. The only reason Toya had succeeded with Hodaka was because he had exchanged his body for the book.

That was why he didn't want anyone to ever find out about their relationship. He could never tell anyone about it. Hodaka probably didn't care if it was revealed that he was gay or bisexual, but Toya didn't feel the same way.

But the thing Toya was most afraid of was that someone else might get closer to Hodaka. There could be other people who would use their bodies to get close to Hodaka, just like Toya had.

Their relationship was slanted disproportionately toward the physical. Hodaka had only told Toya that he loved him once, after Toya had so sincerely declared his feelings in Hayama. But that wasn't enough to reassure Toya.

If Hodaka wasn't looking for anything deeper than the physical relationship he had with Toya, someone else might come along eventually. And not too far in the future, either.

When had Toya begun to think like that? After all that self-reflection, Toya realized that his doubts were lapping at his feet like a wave. Since he had become aware of his fears, he felt as if they would drag him away into darkness. All he wanted was to immerse himself in the joy of being in love, but the more he realized that Hodaka aroused him so intensely, the deeper his fears became.

I love Hodaka.

Toya didn't want to give Hodaka up. He didn't want anyone to take him away. He didn't want to think about losing Hodaka.

Hodaka was a cruel and arrogant man who didn't treat people like human beings. He was selfish and stubbornly independent. But he was also somehow awkward and tender—and alone.

Hodaka had lost his parents in a car accident while still young, and every year on the anniversary of their deaths, he set out a vase of lilies. They were his mother's favorite flower. Toya knew how much solitude Hodaka faced, submerged alone in his memories.

Since Hodaka had everything he could ever want, he didn't try to get any more. He had been given everything, but he seemed to refuse it all.

Toya still didn't regret that his heart had been captured by a man like him. Despite his doubts, whenever he remembered what Hodaka was really like, he wanted to hear his voice and know what he was doing. His longing only grew stronger.

Finally Toya's resistance broke down and he picked up the cordless telephone on his bedside table. He knew he was probably going to bother Hodaka, but he couldn't stop himself.

After the fourth ring, he heard Hodaka pick up. "Yes?"

"Um, it's me. Sakurai."

"Oh, hello."

Was it Toya's imagination that Hodaka's voice sounded ever so slightly more cheerful? Alone in his

room, he flushed at the thought. Hodaka's deep voice was so gorgeous, winding reassuringly around Toya's heart.

"What is it?"

"Uh, nothing. I was lonely," Toya confessed, managing to expose his weakness much more easily than when they spoke face to face.

Toya didn't know if "lonely" was an accurate description of how he felt. Anxiety had simply caught hold of him, and he was scared that he might lose Hodaka eventually.

"Lonely? Then why not come here? Are you at work?"

"No, I'm at home. But that's not what I meant." Toya stumbled to a halt. He felt lonely because he didn't feel like he had ever gotten hold of the thing he truly wanted.

What he wanted was Hodaka's heart. At Hayama, Hodaka had told Toya that if he wanted his heart he could have it. But was the tenderness and love that came from Hodaka's heart truly intended for Toya? If Toya asked Hodaka to indulge him, would Hodaka do it? No matter how much Toya wanted to tell Hodaka about these muddled feelings, he didn't have the confidence to do it.

"Then I'll give you a charm to keep your loneliness away."

Toya wanted to laugh hearing the word "charm" coming from Hodaka. It didn't suit him at all. Just hearing the word had cheered Toya up. That alone saved Toya. He felt as if Hodaka had soothed him.

That was how he wanted to talk to Hodaka: pleasantly, sharing words, sharing their feelings, getting a little closer to understanding him. Toya wanted to be sure that Hodaka loved him.

“What kind of charm?”

“It’s a charm to help you sleep.”

A gently moist sound trembled against Toya’s eardrum. Hodaka had kissed the mouthpiece. If it had been anyone else, Toya would have found the gesture affected, but the thought of Hodaka doing it warmed his heart. In that moment, his love for Hodaka was confirmed. How else could he have found such a thing endearing?

“Sir...I had no idea you were such a romantic.”

“Is that bad?” Hodaka sounded miffed. It was cute. His gorgeous voice usually brought Toya to his knees with its depth, but then, it was fraught with childishness.

“No, it’s really, really good.”

“That’s what makes you so adorable.” Hodaka’s low voice sent a thrill through Toya’s nerves as it poured out of the phone. “Would you like a reward before you go to sleep?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sure you don’t like sleeping alone. So I’ll make you feel better.”

Toya was shocked when he realized the implication of Hodaka’s words. His heart was making a terrible noise.

“This is the part where you ask me how I’m going to make you feel better.”

“Please be serious, sir.”

“But Toya, all I want is to hear your adorable little voice.”

Toya could never help but be intoxicated by Hodaka’s voice. When Hodaka whispered to him so sweetly, he felt his entire brain going numb.

Toya gulped, feeling his heat rising slowly as his body reacted to the voice of the man he loved.

“You must realize how adorable your obedience is.”

Toya could feel Hodaka’s words drawing the pleasure out of him. His flirtation, traced out in the unwavering sighs of his voice, threatened to cast Toya into the depths of his desire.

“Touch yourself and then tell me you’re not excited.”

Toya’s heart beat faster at the sweetness of the invitation.

I can’t do this. We’re doing things Hodaka’s way again!

Toya summoned up his resolve and opened his mouth to interrupt. “There’s—there’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh?” Hodaka’s voice sounded immediately uninterested. “Well if you do what I told you, we can talk.”

“But if I do what you tell me, I won’t be able to talk. I don’t want to do this right now.”

“So what you’re saying is you’ve done it with some other man?”

Toya couldn’t understand why that would be the

first thing Hodaka asked him. He didn't want Hodaka to misunderstand his silence as he searched for an answer, so he shouted, "Of course not!"

"I can't believe that, considering how dirty you are."

Their conversation had been derailed so easily. Toya felt like he was getting a headache. He wouldn't go after just anyone to satisfy the needs of his body. He wanted Hodaka, and only Hodaka. He loved only him. No one had ever been able to change Toya's life except Hodaka. Without him, there would never have been even the slightest tremor in Toya's heart.

Toya wanted to tell him that, but no matter how hard he tried, he felt like Hodaka never understood. He wanted more than Hodaka's body. He wanted his heart, too. But he didn't know if he was allowed to say something so selfish. But if all Hodaka wanted was a body, he didn't really need Toya.

"That's enough. I'm sorry I bothered you so late at night."

Toya said quickly and hung up. He flung the phone away and threw himself onto his bed. He sighed. So they were going to break up. Why did things always turn out badly? Hodaka hadn't made even the slightest effort to understand why Toya was lonely. Hodaka didn't have to be nice to him all the time; Toya just wanted to be recognized as a person. Even if his body was satisfied, his heart wasn't. He had told Hodaka that he wanted his heart, and he thought Hodaka had understood that. But the part Toya played in Hodaka's life was insignificant. If someone other than Toya offered their body to Hodaka,

Toya suspected he would follow his whims, and that would be the end of their relationship.

Toya's body shuddered with those miserable thoughts. He shook his head. It wasn't going to work. He had to try harder and find a more fitting evaluation of Hodaka.

Toya knew that compared to Hodaka he was boring in the extreme. He had been sickly and subdued ever since childhood and he couldn't remember ever making a selfish demand. Moreover, he had understood what a great burden his delicate health imposed on his family, so he had never been selfish enough to ask for anything more. Maybe that was why Toya had trouble deciding when someone's requests turned selfish.

He had no idea how to go about expressing his feelings to a person like Hodaka. Hodaka was arrogant enough to believe that he could manipulate people to do whatever he wanted. His personality and thinking were very different from Toya's. It was mind-boggling trying to figure out how they could work out their problems and stay together.

Chapter Four

“There’s a fax for you, Toya!” Yoshimi called, and Toya looked up. It had been drizzling outside all day and even the air inside the office was oppressively humid.

“It says it’s from Yo Amano.”

“Are you sure?” Toya asked in an unintentionally loud voice, grabbing the bundle of papers from Yoshimi’s hands. “Wow, that’s amazing!”

Yoshimi’s eyes widened in surprise at Toya’s wild reaction.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that I’ve been waiting to hear from him.”

“You mean you get excited about people besides Kai Hodaka now?” she asked, deadpan, and Toya struggled to reply more evenly.

“I try to give all my authors equal attention.”

“Maybe you do, but Mister Hodaka is special.”

Toya’s response died on his lips, so he merely gave a guarded smirk.

Amano had sent Toya the plot summary for his next novel. Some authors would send a full manuscript all at once, but this was Amano’s first job, so he was in a position much closer to that of a novice. Once Toya saw how the story was going to progress, they would get together and discuss how to handle the actual writing.

Toya read through the handful of pages Amano

had sent, and then drew his lips into a sly smile.

This could be good.

Of course the book wouldn't follow the summary exactly, but it was so promising that it didn't matter. The characters were original and it looked like it would turn out to be a very unique story. Toya found two or three possible problems in the story structure, but if he just drew Amano's attention to them, they wouldn't cause any trouble at such an early stage.

Toya just needed someone else to give it a look. He leaned over to Yoshikawa at the next desk and asked, "Hey, do you have a minute?"

"Sure, what's up?"

"Could you take a look at this? It's a plot summary from a new author. I want to hear what you think about it."

"No problem," Yoshikawa said and flipped to the first page.

Toya went back to his other work, but occasionally stole glances at Yoshikawa. At first, the other man looked completely uninterested, but then his increasing enthusiasm became obvious. Once he'd finished reading the entire summary, Yoshikawa looked up at Toya.

"How was it?" Toya asked.

"It's pretty good! I'd love to read the final product. It's a great outline."

That wasn't the kind of feedback Toya had been hoping for, but it was typical of Yoshikawa.

"What did you think of the plot outline?"

"It looked good. I think it could work. The teens and twenties would love it. We don't have a lot of authors

in that demographic, so we could really use this."

"Thanks a lot." Toya smiled at him. "Could you pass it on to Mister Makihara?"

Toya awaited the verdict with the nerves of a kid waiting for exam results, but the response inside the department was top rate. Some people were out on assignments so he couldn't get their opinions, but after showing it to five other editors, four told him it was good. Toya thought it would fly.

Unable to calm his rushing emotions, Toya picked up his phone, looked up a number in his address book, and called Amano.

"Hello?"

"Hello, this is Sakurai from Sozan Publishing. Am I speaking to Mister Amano?"

"Oh, Mister Sakurai!" Amano's voice was instantly cheerful. "How was the summary?"

"It got some good reactions when I passed it around the department. Everyone would love to see this story in print."

"Are you for real?"

Toya could just imagine how excited the handsome young man looked. The thought warmed Toya's heart and a smile came naturally over his lips.

"We'd like for you to begin writing as soon as possible."

"Well, about that." Amano's voice was suddenly awkward.

"Is there a problem with your current editors?"

Maybe there had been some resistance from the publishers of *Appearance*.

"No, that's all fine. My friend gave me permission."

"Then what's the problem?"

"Well, I already wrote the first fifty or so pages. I should have waited to get your company's formatting rules, but..."

"What?" Toya said quietly. It was progress like he had never dreamed of.

"I'm sorry. I'm sure there are things in the summary I need to change. I just got so carried away."

"No, no, it isn't that! I'd love to read what you've done so far."

"Really?"

"If it isn't too much trouble, could you e-mail them to me now?" Toya said in a blur of speed, unable to reign in his excitement.

"If you want, but it isn't finished yet. I haven't polished it at all."

"That's all right."

"Okay then. I'll send it right now," Amano agreed and then hung up.

Frequently, manuscript drafts fell far below what the summary promised, particularly when that promise was so superb. Sometimes Toya could only marvel at how the authors he worked with managed to write what they did after such amazing summaries.

So if Amano had already written the first fifty pages, Toya definitely wanted to take a look at it. If he could check what Amano was writing against what he had been aiming for, adjustments would be easier to make.

Soon, Toya got on his computer to check his e-mail and found two new messages. One was from Hodaka and the other was Amano's project.

Toya made sure the file opened, and then made a printout of Amano's text following the Sozan Novels format. Unfortunately, the office machines were tied up and it looked like it was going to take a while. While he waited, he opened Hodaka's e-mail. Surprisingly, it was an invitation to have dinner together that night. It had been a long time since Hodaka had invited Toya to do anything. Hodaka had even specified the time, asking Toya to come to Roppongi at seven. In order to make it in time, Toya would have to leave the office in the next thirty minutes.

Obviously, Toya was thrilled to get an invitation from Hodaka, but since he had just asked Amano to send him his project, he had to read that first. But that wasn't Toya's sense of duty speaking: it was his burning desire to read the story.

Besides, he still had some hard feelings toward Hodaka.

Though he had been wrong to call Hodaka the other day, that didn't change the fact that Toya felt annoyed with their relationship, which was little more than sex. It was probably better to keep his distance from Hodaka for a little bit and let himself cool back down. So Toya typed out a response to Hodaka saying he couldn't make it.

“Mister Amano.”

Toya had arrived five minutes early and was waiting for Amano at the bar when the man appeared at the lounge. Toya was relieved and raised his hand casually to wave Amano over.

There was one bartender behind the dimly lit bar. The interior design was upscale and subdued and included a beautiful wooden bar without a single scratch on it.

It wasn't one of the so-called “literary bars.” Many ordinary people went there. But the owner loved mystery novels and was well known in the industry. He sometimes even wrote reviews. Thanks to his clout, authors would often put in appearances there. His name was well known to aficionados.

“Hello. I'm so nervous,” Amano said.

None of the customers that day looked especially like authors, aside from Amano, stressing out on the stool beside Toya. Of course, Toya couldn't remember what every single author looked like, so he had to avoid saying anything careless.

“Do you get nervous being in a place like this?”

Amano looked like a man of experience, but maybe he really wasn't.

“Oh, it's not the bar. It's just you calling me out here to give me your impressions of the book. I mean, it's not even close to being done. I have zero confidence.”

Once Toya had read the work that Amano had sent him, he had wanted to discuss his reactions so badly that he just couldn't wait. They had made plans to get together, and since Amano had expressed a desire to see

what that bar was like, they had agreed to meet there.

“First things first: what would you like to drink?” Toya asked.

“I'll take a bourbon on the rocks.”

Toya drank his share of alcohol, but he couldn't handle anything strong. Even the smell made him feel sick. When he actually managed to drink whiskey or bourbon, his delicate build made their effects even worse, Toya thought bitterly. “Anything to eat?”

“I guess some vegetable sticks and cheese.”

“All right.”

Toya ordered a salty dog then turned back to Amano, who was digging in to the bowl of complimentary nuts.

“I read your work.”

Amano had just tossed a handful of nuts into his mouth, but the sudden turn in the conversation seemed to catch him off guard. He began coughing violently, tears gathering in the corners of his eyes.

“I'm sorry! I didn't mean to scare you!”

“No! I just wasn't expecting that. But how was it?”

“It was excellent. I know that you only have fifty pages of it, but I regret rushing through it. At least I was able to spend some more time on it.” Toya smiled shyly.

“You're pretty good,” Amano responded playfully. Maybe it was his way of hiding his embarrassment. “Is that what you tell all your authors?”

“Not at all. This is my job, so if it wasn't good I would tell you.”

"Then I'm happy to hear that you liked it. It makes it all worthwhile."

Honestly, Amano's writing was so good that it didn't need to be flattered. The plot had an intriguing romantic touch to it, but Toya was eager for the complex story he was sure would come. But once Toya had begun, he'd been sucked into the world of the book by the charm of Amano's character descriptions and his profound knowledge.

"Did you notice any problems?"

"There was one thing. The main characters Masahiro and Tomoya are almost exactly the same. They're both intellectuals. It's interesting when they talk to each other, but I think if you define their roles a little more clearly, that would highlight their individuality and make them more interesting."

"Hmm."

"Would a little change like that be difficult?"

In the end, only the author's opinion mattered; Toya couldn't force him to change anything. Toya pursued the idea with Amano in a very roundabout way, not wanting to upset him if he could help it. But Amano shook his head easily. "No, not at all. I was a little confused by them, too. Most parts are easy to write, but those two are essentially the same. I wasn't sure how I was going to give either of them emotions."

Amano was surprisingly compliant to Toya's suggestions. Of course, nothing said that an author needed to meekly obey his editor in all things. It was only natural that he would have opinions of his own about his work. Of course, if Amano could accept and integrate

the opinions of a third party, so much the better.

The two had finished off a good amount of alcohol, so when they finished talking about the project, their conversation turned naturally from business to their personal lives, and they began discussing Amano's school days.

"Did you do any part-time work while you were in school?" Toya asked.

"Yes, I worked in a map store." Swirling the liquid in his glass, Amano's eyes turned toward Toya. He seemed to be searching Toya's eyes. Amano's face was painful to look at and Toya unobtrusively looked away.

"A map store?"

"Yeah. We sold antique maps."

"Excuse me for asking, but why maps?"

"When I was writing *Appearance*, I needed to use an older map for reference. But I couldn't find the one I needed anywhere."

While searching every map store he could find, Amano had entered a particular antique map dealer's store. For some reason, he and the owner hit it off after a casual chat.

"You mean, like what kind of music you like?"

"Sort of, but not quite. But hey, what do you think I like?"

"Hmm. I'm not sure. Rock or punk, probably," Toya guessed, dutifully offering the genres that seemed to best fit Amano's style. Amano shook his head in amusement.

"Nope. *Rakugo*."

"You mean that medieval comedy stuff?"

Toya's usual mask of detached composure slipped momentarily. Amano stole a glance at him, looking amused, but he quickly looked away again.

"That's right. I'm a rabid fan of *rakugo*. I was listening to a mini disc of it that day and I suddenly burst out laughing in the middle of the store."

Toya was sure that had been awkward. He could understand why the owner had started talking to Amano.

"That's interesting. So you just got a job by chance?"

"Yeah. But it was really useful. If you ever need a map for your research, you gotta come by our store." Amano grinned, and then suddenly peered into Toya's eyes. "Hey, your eyes are a lot paler than most people's. Do you wear color contacts?"

"No, I was born with them. It makes my eyes water when the sun is too bright."

"Really? Is that because you don't blink very much?"

"Maybe. I don't really understand it very well myself," Toya answered ambiguously. That seemed to satisfy Amano.

The doors to the bar opened, accompanied by the sound of more people arriving. The air moved slightly, brushing pleasantly against Toya's cheek, flushed with alcohol.

"I always imagined the editors of pulp mystery novels to be more like the raving fans. I'm a little surprised. Your features are so delicate—so beautiful."

Toya only smirked at being called beautiful, a

word that normally described women. "People tell me all the time that I don't fit the image. I used to work in literature and fiction."

"I'm really grateful I get to work with you. Your suggestions are really clear."

"It's only because you gave me such a fantastic outline to work with."

It was going to be some time to see whether Amano would continue to accept Toya's critiques so eagerly and still maintain their friendship all the way until the end of the project. But if Amano felt positively about the person he was going to be working with, that would make working together much easier.

"Oh, no. Really, it's not—" Amano started to speak, then cut himself off. His eyes were fixed on a single point and didn't move.

Turning around to see what Amano was looking at, Toya's eyes fell on something completely unexpected. He had never suspected for even a moment that Hodaka went to bars, but there he was, with Kotaro Ichikura, another mystery writer. In the purposely dim lighting, Hodaka's face was obscured by shadows. It only served to highlight the beauty of his features.

Toya inclined his head slightly and Hodaka walked over to them, smiling. "What a surprise to see you here."

"I didn't expect to see you in a place like this, sir." Toya put on his business mask to conceal his internal upheaval. He smiled and nodded to Ichikura as well. "It's nice to see you again, Mister Ichikura."

"Mister Sakurai! What are you doing here? I heard

you blew off Hodaka's invitation." Ichikura gave a short laugh.

Toya watched, terror beginning to swell within him. Ichikura was one of the authors Toya worked with and one of Hodaka's very few friends. Ichikura was a part-time author who lived in the countryside. He was always busy. Toya had always wanted to meet him, but they had never had a chance to sit down and have a leisurely chat.

Toya and Hodaka had been talking about Ichikura recently, so maybe Hodaka had arranged that night's dinner to allow the two to meet. It would be typically thoughtful of him. If only Hodaka had told him that in the first place, Toya wouldn't have been so quick to reject the invitation.

"Is this a friend of yours?" Hodaka asked imperiously, pretending to be completely unaware of the chaos inside Toya.

"This is Yo Amano, who'll be writing something for my company."

"Hm? Amano? Oh, you wrote *Appearance*, didn't you?" Ichikura seemed to know who Amano was.

Amano's face brightened. "You know who I am?"

"My friends and I have been talking about you. Are the two of you talking business?"

"No, we've wrapped that part up," Toya said.

Ichikura looked thrilled. "Would you like to join us, then? We were just going to get a quick drink on our way home, so we won't bother you for long."

"Really?"

Seeing the intense glow in Amano's eyes at the prospect of sitting with such revered authors, Toya couldn't refuse. He considered excusing himself and leaving, but Hodaka cut in instantly. "You too, Mister Sakurai."

He could no longer escape.

They explained to the staff and then moved to a four person table. Toya was sitting across from Hodaka. It terrified him to think about what could happen, but the conversation was even more peaceful than he could have expected.

Amano's friendly, sociable personality seemed to mesh well with Ichikura's. The two talked happily of the mystery novels they'd read and movies they'd seen recently. Hodaka and Toya found themselves outside their conversation.

Amano had admitted to being a fan of Hodaka's, so Toya had expected him to try harder to talk to Hodaka, but he was probably still too shy to say anything to an author he worshipped. The reticence of the young man struck Toya as endearing.

Suddenly, Toya felt something strike him lightly in the shin. Looking up in shock, his eyes met Hodaka's. Toya had no time to wonder what was going on before Hodaka spoke slowly. "I think I'm going to head home, Ichikura. How about you?"

"Oh. Well, since we're here, I think I'll stay and talk to Amano a bit longer. I don't get a lot of opportunities to talk to young people."

Amano was looking at Toya with a complex expression. But when Hodaka kicked his shin again,

Toya stood up quickly.

"In that case, I'll take this opportunity to head out, too. I have to be at work early tomorrow. Thank you for seeing me today."

Ichikura decided that he'd rather go to the bar at his hotel, if everyone was leaving. That distraction allowed Toya to leave ahead of everyone. When Toya paid his bill and left the bar, he saw Hodaka standing off to one side of the door.

"Mister Hodaka?"

"Let's split a cab. I'll take you home."

"What?"

"You have to get up early tomorrow, don't you?"

Toya couldn't fight the tone of Hodaka's voice. It was somehow sexual. Toya had barely had anything to drink, but he was convinced that his legs were wobbling. The sensual voice skimmed over his skin and Toya's entire body began to ache for Hodaka. Hodaka had suggested calling it a night, but his own disgusting body, incapable of self-denial, wouldn't settle for that.

"No! Um, it's my job to see you safely home, sir."

"Well, thank you then."

"Of course."

Once they reached the street, it was easy to find an empty taxi. Toya hailed it and let Hodaka climb in first. Hodaka had apparently already told the driver where to go by the time Toya got in, as the taxi pulled smoothly away the moment the door shut.

Toya thought about how much he wanted Hodaka to touch him. But of course, Hodaka didn't. It was

getting harder to draw each new, painful breath, but Toya fought back. They would not bring their bodies together that night. He hated how disappointed that made him feel. But he was angry that he couldn't contain his own emotions.

The dark windows reflected his face and he found it ugly, stained by the alcohol he'd drunk. He had been hoping to talk with Hodaka, but when the moment had come, he went after his own pleasure instead. It depressed him to see how disgusting he truly was.

He began talking to buy himself some time.

"How did you meet Mister Ichikura, sir?"

"I don't think you need to know that."

"...I'm sorry."

Toya hadn't imagined that Hodaka would refuse to answer him like that. Toya could only hang his head in misery.

Was it wrong for him to want to know just a little bit more about the person he loved? Or was it simply incompatible with Hodaka's personality? Toya ruminated over what he'd said, thinking perhaps he had phrased his question badly, but nothing jumped out at him.

Hodaka's rejection had scared Toya and he didn't try to say anything more. All that was left for him was to gaze out the window. They pulled onto a crowded street that Toya didn't recognize. Before he could register how odd that was, the taxi slowed and pulled into the driveway of a luxury hotel near Kyobashi. The area was popular for the night views available from the hotels in the handful of high rise buildings.

"Here we are."

Toya stared blankly at the driver's unexpected announcement.

"Get out," Hodaka said.

"Mister Hodaka—"

But since Hodaka was pushing on his shoulder, it would be strange for Toya to continue refusing. He climbed out of the taxi with no idea of what was going on. Hodaka followed him out then, taking light hold of his arm, and pulled him along.

"But sir—"

Had he gone there to drink some more? But surely it was almost time for last call. What was Hodaka doing?

"Come with me."

Hodaka pulled Toya into the elevator, and then pulled him out again when they reached the hotel's front desk. Hodaka took long strides, giving Toya no time to enjoy the view.

"Welcome back, Mister Hodaka." A tall man who appeared to be the concierge approached them and put on a bright smile for Hodaka.

"I want a suite."

"Very good, sir. Have you registered?"

"I'll take care of that tomorrow."

"In that case, sir, please follow me."

That seemed to be all it took to sidestep the tedious check-in procedures. A young bellhop escorted them to a luxury suite on the top floor. Toya sobered the moment the door swung open.

"Enjoy your stay."

The bellhop showed them the emergency exit and explained the air conditioner, and then withdrew with a wide smile.

Toya fell back a step, a sign of his uneasiness at being left alone with Hodaka in a hotel room. "Um—thank you for everything today. I think I should be going."

"Leaving so soon?"

"I said that I would see you safely home." Toya bit his lip, not quite knowing where to look. There was a single king-size bed in the room.

"You said you'd take me home, so you haven't kept your promise yet. I'll let you take me home in the morning. You can stay here, too."

"I would rather come get you in the morning."

Of course he was glad that Hodaka wanted to be alone with him. But if they stayed there alone together, it would only increase the physical nature of their relationship. Toya was sure the hotel staff wouldn't leak word of it, but who knew if anyone had seen them come in?

"If I let you go home now, you might pick up another guy somewhere." The raw sarcasm in Hodaka's voice aggravated Toya and he glared up at him. When he met Hodaka's unexpectedly sincere gaze, Toya gasped in surprise.

"I-I wouldn't do that."

"When I said I'd take you home, you looked disappointed. Do you remember?"

"But that was—"

"I wasn't just imagining it, was I?"

Hodaka brought his face closer to Toya's and touched his lips to his forehead. Toya closed his eyes reflexively and Hodaka's lips brushed over his eyelids like feathers before sliding down to press softly against his lips. Hodaka dabbed Toya with kisses gently before slipping his tongue between Toya's slightly parted lips. Toya's forehead tightened and he clung to Hodaka's neck as the man stimulated the inside of Toya's mouth.

"Nngh—mm."

As Hodaka kissed him, Toya was forced to take breath after ragged breath, each one more difficult than the last. Even after Hodaka pulled his lips away, the glow of the kiss remained. Toya could only stand there.

"If only you could see your face."

"What does that mean?" Toya asked, dazed, but Hodaka just shrugged.

"Come here," he murmured in a low voice, grabbing both of Toya's arms.

"Sir—?"

Hodaka dragged Toya into the large bathroom, making Toya writhe with apprehension. The sound of their shoes clicking against the floor echoed strangely in the tiled bathroom.

"I've let you get away with a lot. I'm going to help you remember who owns you," Hodaka said.

Punishment, he meant; the cold intent of those words sent a chill down Toya's spine. Sometimes, Toya couldn't bear Hodaka's aggressiveness. The man could be arrogant, but most of the time he was a quiet, gentle person. It was only during sex that he showed a completely different side of himself. Toya's will meant

nothing for all Hodaka cared. Hodaka subjugated Toya's body to his own desires, trying to dominate even his spirit.

"I'm not going to let you leave now. Look at yourself."

"Ow!" Toya cried as Hodaka held him in a full nelson and turned him to the mirror. Toya nearly screamed at the force twisting his body, but Hodaka showed no mercy.

"Look."

Hodaka bit down on Toya's neck: red marks bloomed across his delicate skin. Oblivious to Toya's discomfort, Hodaka skillfully unbuttoned Toya's shirt.

"Look at what?" Toya shrieked, anger and shame making his voice shrill.

Hodaka was utterly indifferent to his behavior. "Your face. Don't you see?"

Toya didn't see anything unusual. He didn't even look ashamed—or so he thought. But the eyes he saw reflected in the mirror were already rich with desire and his cheeks were flushed.

"I know you see it. The lust in your eyes is an open invitation to any man."

"I'm not doing it on purpose!"

"There's no point in denying it." Hodaka held Toya's chin, trailing one of his fingers across Toya's lips before slipping it inside his mouth. Toya grunted in a pained, muffled voice. But Hodaka apparently wouldn't even allow him that much and pinched Toya's tongue between two fingers.

"Ggh—ah!"

Tears started to well in Toya's eyes. "Stop it!"

Hodaka's hand brushed over Toya's erection through his clothes and Toya shook his head. As Toya moved, he accidentally bit down on Hodaka's fingers, making the other man gasp.

"I'm sorry, Mister Hodaka—"

"You really don't want it?" Hodaka asked in a low voice.

Toya shook his head. "I'm tired. Please, just let me go home."

If he told Hodaka that he didn't want to do it in a hotel, it would probably hurt his feelings since he had gone to the trouble of bringing them there. Toya did everything in his power to hide the truth, but it only won him Hodaka's scorn.

"I haven't finished punishing you yet. I can't stop now."

Toya felt Hodaka's silent laugh against his ear. Before Toya could escape his grip, Hodaka had pushed his body against the bathroom counter. His bony hips struck the edge and ached sharply. Hodaka reached around with one hand to take playful hold of Toya's penis, stroking it to keep him in place.

"Let—let me go! I'll go straight home!" Toya's body began to ache as the familiar touches began, his voice breaking with tense gasps. He couldn't understand why Hodaka used such attacks against him.

"You want it too badly. Don't try to lie to me."

"No—"

Hodaka stroked Toya through his clothes with a practiced hand, trying to excite Toya, but his caresses

were growing increasingly impatient.

"You mean you don't feel anything? Even when I touch you like this?"

Toya knew he had to resist, but beneath the clothes that clung to his body, his skin was getting damp and Toya couldn't tell if the moisture from his shaft was sweat or something else. With that thought, Toya's fingers trembled as he gripped the counter and he fell against the mirror.

"I can see how hard you are."

"Nn—no! Ah!"

Hodaka tugged at Toya's rigid nipples, dragging his nails across them. That painful pleasure always drove Toya over the edge. Hodaka pinched the nipples between two fingers, squeezing and pulling them tightly as he rubbed them. Tears welled up in Toya's eyes, unable to fight back against the aching pain of his pleasure. Touches like those were all it took for his voice to break and his thoughts to flee.

"You get excited when all I do is play with these?"

"No," Toya shot back, his voice weak and reproachful, but Hodaka wouldn't listen. He was too busy admiring Toya's body as the lights in the bathroom brightly laid bare Toya's humiliating position.

"Look in the mirror, Toya." Hodaka bit down softly on Toya's ear, but Toya shook his head. He knew if he looked he would only regret what he saw.

"You've been disobeying me all night," Hodaka said, and as the beautiful voice poured over Toya's ears, he felt his ability to think lost, along with the rest of his

power to resist. But it would be so much more terrifying to obey Hodaka.

Maybe Hodaka didn't expect that to destroy him. Did it not scare him? Was he not afraid of destroying their relationship for such a tiny excuse? Toya felt like he was the only one who ever worried about how to maintain their relationship.

"You want me to punish you that badly? You're dripping wet. How sad," Hodaka laughed against Toya's ear as he pulled down Toya's zipper and brushed against his underwear. Hodaka was right: there was fluid welling up, staining Toya's clothes.

"Then—then why don't you believe me?" Tears of sadness pooled beside the tears of misery in Toya's eyes.

"Because everybody lies."

"I'm not—"

Hodaka didn't lie: he lived every day so honestly that he wouldn't even flatter people in order to be conversational. Toya knew that. He didn't want to lie, either. He wanted to be as honest as possible with Hodaka.

"Everybody betrays the people they love. It's not a bad thing; it's just human nature. But you ...your body is too honest. You can try to hide things from me, but in the end your body tells me the truth."

Without ever pausing in his caresses, the man added: "I taught it to be so truthful. Or can you swear that you'll never lie to me or break a promise to me again?" Hodaka's hands stopped then, his voice as heartless as if he were a judge sentencing a criminal.

"I-I swear." Toya thought his words might allow him to escape the obscene abuse. He had never had the slightest intention of lying to Hodaka anyway.

"Now let's ask your body if you can keep that promise."

By then, Hodaka wasn't holding back.

"Ahh!"

Hodaka pushed shallowly through Toya's underwear and into his cleft. Toya's head swung back reflexively at the sensation. He couldn't understand how things had come to that point. The touches on his sex were unbearable. He swelled uncomfortably against his underwear, but all he could do was futilely scrape his nails against the mirror.

It had been a while since Hodaka had molested him so cruelly, and the shock was fresh. But Toya couldn't run from it. Without quite realizing it, Toya stuck his hips out at Hodaka and pressed his hands hard against the mirror, trusting the weight of his body to it. The edge of the counter struck him directly on the hips and it hurt to be pressed against it.

Assaulted through the cloth of his underwear, both front and back, Toya writhed, knowing it would accomplish nothing. He didn't want to have his will and his dignity trampled like that. But still, his tiny bud was eager for Hodaka, pathetically eager. Toya wanted nothing more than to feel Hodaka inside his body. He felt himself surrendering to that desire and it frightened him.

"No—no, please. Stop!"

Hodaka's fingers moved over Toya with a

deliberate leisure, exciting him terribly when Toya just wanted to be touched where it mattered.

“Stop?” Hodaka reached into Toya’s underwear and took merciless hold of his penis. Toya gulped. “Are you going to come already?”

“No, I—”

Toya wanted to get away. He had to get away. But his body betrayed his will, growing more and more ecstatic. Toya’s spirit tried to cling to a shred of its rationality, but it too was being swept away.

He thought he was going crazy. He loved Hodaka, but that love clouded his judgment. He wished Hodaka would stop tormenting him and be nicer. But Toya was sure he wasn’t allowed to ask for that.

“If you want me to touch you, say so.”

“No!”

Hodaka reached inside Toya’s underwear and laid his hand against the curve of his thigh. He was on the verge of touching Toya, but never did it, driving Toya mad with frustrated desire.

“You’re as stubborn as ever. You must really want me to torture you.”

That domineering jab was carried by a voice of such allure that Toya was captivated, almost forgetting where he was. The overflowing sensuality of Hodaka’s beautiful voice always overruled Toya.

“I feel so bad for you. Look how excited you are,” Hodaka said. He traced the shape of Toya’s obscenely dripping sex with tenacious fingers, pushing Toya to his limits.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just tell me?”

Toya’s pride and self-respect were of no use with Hodaka. He forgot who he was, his life focusing solely on the pursuit of absolute pleasure.

“Touch me!” Toya begged, on the verge of sobbing.

“How? Is this good?”

Hodaka’s fingertips became bolder than before as they fondled Toya. But Toya still wasn’t satisfied. He wanted more. Harder.

“Touch it. With your fingers,” Toya begged, opening his parched mouth.

Those meandering caresses through his clothes were pointless. Toya didn’t want them. What he wanted was the obscene satisfaction that only Hodaka’s hands could give him.

“Is that how you do it when you beg that other man?”

Toya felt a quick pain like a thorn in his heart, but it was soon forgotten. Hodaka pulled down Toya’s underwear and took hold of him. The feeling of having that sticky part of himself gently handled by Hodaka’s fingers pushed Toya toward an intoxicating pleasure that paralyzed him.

“Let’s find out how innocent you are,” the man whispered at his ear. He picked up a bottle of lotion that the hotel had set out for them. He squeezed the white lotion into his palm, releasing an extraordinary fragrance as it spread over his fingers.

“Ahh!”

The slickness of the lotion allowed Hodaka to slip two fingers immediately into Toya’s body. Toya sobbed

at the guile Hodaka used to force open the tightest part of his body, but his body still trembled at the intense pleasure he felt when Hodaka rubbed against his insides. The intense pleasure washed over Toya, making it difficult to stand.

“Nngh! Ah! Yes!”

Toya began moving his hips rhythmically with Hodaka’s fingers, pulled along by the maddening pleasure he felt.

“You’re already so eager and I’m only using my fingers. Your hole is doing my work for me.” Hodaka’s detached words only encouraged Toya.

“No, no more—”

Toya knew he was close to release. His mind was going white and a tight ache constricted the inside of his body. His heart beat faster with anticipation and even his breathing became unsteady.

“I’m not done yet.” Hodaka lightly squeezed Toya’s penis as he spoke, and Toya jumped.

“Ow!”

“Today I’ll make you come all by yourself.”

In Toya’s current state, he couldn’t begin to understand what Hodaka meant by that. He just wanted Hodaka to let him come. He would do anything for that.

“Look at yourself in the mirror.”

Toya rebelled, lowering his head and squeezing his eyes shut. But Hodaka wouldn’t let him get away with it. Holding Toya’s chin, Hodaka whispered once more for Toya to look in the mirror. “Do you want me to be even crueler?”

There was nothing else Toya could do. He

reluctantly turned his gaze upward. In the highly polished mirror, he saw Hodaka standing behind him, squeezing the unabashed enthusiasm of his manhood. Toya could barely stand while he stared into the mirror with an empty expression. Hodaka’s melancholy face over his shoulder was a sharp contrast and only encouraged Toya’s shame.

“Stop it!”

“Why? Look at yourself. You want it so badly. You’re adorable, Toya.”

Hodaka squeezed Toya’s penis as if to prove it to him, pushing his fingers deeper inside Toya’s body and licking up Toya’s neck from his shoulder to his chin.

“No—no! Don’t look at me!” Toya’s panting screams made it impossible to swallow and saliva trailed out of his mouth, wetting his chin.

“You’re wet everywhere.”

“Sir, please—please!” Toya cried out as he lowered his eyes, wanting to escape the sight of himself. But with his penis still firmly in Hodaka’s grip, he wasn’t allowed to turn away. Toya was losing his mind from his desire for more. Hodaka would not relent though, and his fingers began exploring the edges of Toya’s bud, drawing out the pleasure. Hodaka’s calm cruelty was having exactly the effect he wanted on Toya.

“Please, what? What do you want?”

Toya couldn’t say it. His hesitation gave Hodaka the time to cruelly add, “Then I’ll just keep doing what I’m doing.” He gave Toya’s inner flesh a sharp jab, prodding deeper than before. Though Toya had been trained to say many shameful things to Hodaka in the

past, the man always tried to make him say things even dirtier than the time before.

Hodaka's fingers moved against the moist inner walls of Toya's body more gently. In an unconscious decision, Toya started to rock his hips in time to the movements. When Hodaka noticed, he tried to pull his fingers out of Toya's body, but Toya's disgusting flesh clung to Hodaka's finger, making Toya draw an abrupt breath.

"That's amazing. You're holding me in," Hodaka said.

Toya wanted more. That kind of stimulation wasn't enough. He wanted Hodaka to be brutal to him. Breathing feebly, Toya flung his pride into the abyss.

"Please. Let me c—nngh."

"I can't hear you. Speak louder."

"Please let me come."

As soon as he said that, Toya felt his temperature rise. Hodaka knew that Toya hated being forced to ask to come, but Hodaka liked it, so Toya was forced to speak those humiliating words. Toya realized, thinking back, that Hodaka had trained him to obey and repeat those intolerable words.

The sensations from Toya's entire body, his pleasure, his pride: he was surrendering everything to Hodaka, leaving himself with nothing but a fierce sense of guilt. His body glowed with embarrassment.

"Are you saying you can't come without my help? You want more?"

The finger inside Toya's body rolled in a slow circle.



"I want more—"

"OK then," Hodaka murmured softly, pulling his finger away from its play. He pressed himself even closer to Toya's body, bringing a robust pressure against Toya's bud. They had hardly ever joined their bodies while standing up and Toya let out a cry from the pain.

"Try to relax a little."

"Ah—anngh! It—it hurts."

Hodaka's member slowly entered Toya's body, its brutal form rubbing wonderfully over the hidden flesh of Toya's body.

"You're still tense."

"But—it's tearing—!"

"Look at yourself, Toya. Watch how your body devours me."

Toya had to obey. He tried to refuse, but his eyes were drawn to the mirror in front of him, as if Hodaka controlled them. He saw his own empty face, his disheveled clothes barely covering his body. In the end, he couldn't look directly at the part of him that was reacting, wet with shame. So he turned away, unable to bear any more.

"You can come if you watch yourself do it."

"N—no! I can't!"

Toya couldn't stop himself from speaking with a voice so sultry he barely recognized it as his own. He would rather die than see himself like that.

"This is your punishment, Toya. You can't pick and choose what you're going to do," Hodaka told him ruthlessly.

"B—but why? Why this?"

"You were going to have sex with that guy, weren't you? Or did you already do it?"

Toya couldn't immediately tell who Hodaka meant by "that guy." But Toya collected himself and thought back over the day's events. "You mean...Amano?"

"So you know who I meant, and I didn't even have to say his name."

Hodaka's voice was typically serene as he softly trailed a hand down Toya's back.

"That was for work."

"Is that all it was?"

Toya could barely speak anymore; he answered with a nod.

"It didn't look like it, but fine. Then you should be able to make me a promise."

"What do you—?"

"Promise me you'll never see that man ever again except for business."

"That's my decision."

It was no doubt Toya's natural candor and strong self-respect that made him say that. Hodaka didn't own him. There was no reason to let him impose restrictions like that.

"Your decision?"

Hodaka tightened his grip on Toya's penis. Somehow, Hodaka had managed to bring Toya's climaxing body under control several times already. Enflamed by his own sensual responses, Toya felt like he was losing his mind. He was reaching his limit.

"Ungh!"

"And you're not going to use a sweet little

whimper like that to attract the other guy, either.”

“I won’t—ah! Mm!”

“As soon as I played with this, you got all tight inside.” The man chuckled, flicking his hand over the tip of Toya’s penis as fluid spilled out. Toya wanted just a little bit more pleasure and pressed his hips against the counter. He was embarrassed, but his body was completely honest.

“Do you need me to say it again?” Hodaka asked.

“What...?”

“You are not going to see this Amano again outside of work. Don’t talk to him any more than you have to in order to do your job.”

Hodaka gripped Toya’s organ much more tightly than before. Toya’s brain went white with pain.

“Promise me,” Hodaka said.

“I-I can’t.”

Even in a situation like that, Toya still had a will of his own. He didn’t want to change the way he did his job because of Hodaka.

“Oh well.”

Still holding Toya’s penis tightly, Hodaka began to thrust ferociously. He pulled his hips back so far that it felt like his shaft would come out, and then thrust violently back inside. The sloppy sound of his abuse was enough to destroy Toya’s mind.

“Ah! Ah—nngh!”

“You like this?” Hodaka smiled in satisfaction as Toya immediately began to devour the pleasure, despite his stubborn resistance.

“Yeah—”

Toya liked it, but he was being held back from the thing he truly wanted. He couldn’t even beg for it without slurring his words.

“You want it to feel even better, I bet. But first you have to make your promise.” Hodaka loosened the fingers squeezing Toya’s member ever so slightly. “Can you do that for me?”

Hodaka ran the palm of his hand from the base of Toya’s member all the way to the tip. There, fluid made Toya’s skin sticky, welling up each moment in the hope of release.

“Toya?”

“I-I promise.”

Toya’s head fell forward in resignation. It was impossible to control himself when his body was powerless. His strength slipped out of him and he fell onto the counter, knocking small bottles of shampoo and soap to the floor. The cool marble of the sink chilled his flushed cheeks slightly.

“Look into the mirror and say that again. Say ‘I won’t see Amano again outside of work, so please let me come.’”

Hodaka waved Toya’s member in a circle, as if teasing him. Toya felt like he was on the edge of insanity.

“I-I won’t—”

“Toya, look into the mirror.”

Toya’s body splayed out on the counter, he raised his head haltingly. His gaze swept over his degenerate face.

“No—”

For a moment, he didn't even recognize the face in the mirror. Tears flowed from his lusty eyes and sweat plastered his hair to his forehead. Saliva trailed perversely from his lips and, perhaps because he had been holding himself back too hard, blood from a small cut stained his lips. To complete the picture, because he had fallen forward, he could see the place where he and Hodaka came together in degrading detail. The man was pulling out and thrusting back in, as if showing off for Toya, making it clear that his body was completely under Hodaka's control.

"No!"

Toya shook his head and tried to chase the image from his mind, but Hodaka's hand held his head, forcing it back.

"You look disgusting, don't you?"

There was nothing Toya could do but nod.

"This is what you look like every time I take you. Desperate, dying to devour the first man who comes along."

"Nngh! Let me—"

"If you can't hold it anymore, say so. Don't you think you've been tortured enough?"

Toya nodded desperately, speaking without any hesitation. "I won't see...Mister Amano again. Not outside of work." His raging passion cut into his words.

"That's a good boy. And why are you promising me that?" Hodaka's beautiful tenor led Toya on.

"Because I-I want to come."

Toya wanted to come so badly he thought he would go crazy. He couldn't think about anything but the

obscene pleasure Hodaka was giving him. He wanted to feel that good everywhere.

"Assuming you're not lying, I expect you to keep that promise. Understood?"

"I understand. Let me come—please—"

It was a beautiful moment. The fingers that had been restraining Toya loosened and in the same instant, Hodaka thrust his hips sharply forward, driving deep into Toya's body.

"Ahh!"

Toya could see his face in the mirror: pure ecstasy. He climaxed, watching himself as he cried out in a disgraceful voice. Thick semen spurted out of him, covering the counter and floor as his body convulsed.

But it *still* wasn't enough. Toya rocked his hips, bringing Hodaka even deeper inside. He wanted Hodaka to fill him completely, forever. He wanted Hodaka to bury himself completely inside his heart and body, filling even the smallest void within him.

"That was...so good, sir. Incredible," Toya breathed, speaking as if he had just awoken from a nightmare. After that, he could say the most obscene things without the slightest hesitation. The moral regulator inside Toya's body had been annihilated.

He felt like he would forget everything except being violated by that man. He would remember only the slapping sound of the thrusts into the deepest part of his body.

"I bet you want me to take you again."

Toya wondered if that drop trailing down his leg was sweat or semen—or even blood.

“Don’t worry about anything else—just surrender to it.”

What Toya really wanted, what he yearned for from the bottom of his heart, was not the flimsy lust he felt. But there was nothing for Toya except to be intoxicated by the pleasure Hodaka gave him.

Chapter Five

“Okay, so we’re going with the first design for the phone cards?”

Everyone attending the meeting nodded at Makihara. They had already decided to give out calling cards as gifts for the company’s fifteenth anniversary, but they hadn’t yet picked a design.

Emergence was still going strong. It had sold 400,000 copies, so Makihara and the sales department were constantly flattering Toya. But the depression lingering in his heart never dissipated. Though it had been nearly a week since that night in the hotel, Toya hadn’t felt like seeing Hodaka and Hodaka hadn’t called him either.

Toya didn’t like the idea that by yielding to Hodaka in exchange for pleasure, he had let the man give him orders about how to do his job. If Hodaka had something to say about their relationship, that was different. But it seemed to be breaking some unspoken rule for Hodaka to mention Amano when Amano had nothing to do with them. Since Hodaka had never before interfered in his job, Toya felt even more depressed.

That night had been terrible. Toya had gotten his underwear dirty, of course, but even his suit was ruined, so Toya couldn’t leave the next day until Hodaka bought him some new clothes. After that, Hodaka had been

extremely nice to him—maybe even chivalrous. They had ordered breakfast from room service, and when Toya said he wasn't hungry, Hodaka had fed him with his own hands. But that wasn't enough to make Toya forgive Hodaka for his actions. Toya doubted whether Hodaka knew the meaning of the word "regret."

Hodaka never retracted his demand that Toya avoid Amano as much as possible outside of work and Toya couldn't understand why Hodaka was so concerned about Amano. Was Hodaka jealous? But Toya was only helping Amano out as an editor. If Hodaka was jealous of Amano, he would have to be jealous of the other authors Toya worked with, including Ichikura. Toya might be acting extra considerate with Amano since he was a new author, but that didn't mean Hodaka had to act so irrationally. Toya couldn't believe that a logical man like Hodaka could be so jealous since Hodaka possessed such a unique thought process. How could he feel something as pedestrian as jealousy? Toya felt conceited just thinking about it.

"And how are everyone's projects going? Sakurai?" Makihara asked, bringing Toya back to the meeting. He looked up, startled at the sudden turn in the conversation.

"Yes?"

"How's your first project going with Amano?"

"There haven't been any problems so far."

The only problem had been when Hodaka suddenly showed up at a meeting with Amano and then dragged Toya off to a hotel. Whenever Toya remembered that, Hodaka's cold, clear voice ordering him not to spend

any more time than necessary with Amano burst back into his mind and depressed him.

"And Takashima?"

"It's been a bit of a battle. The proofs are coming out on Wednesday, so I should have something the week after next."

"If it's not ready for publishing next month, there's going to be trouble."

There was an implication that Takashima's novel was a must-have and Toya's face hardened under the pressure. "Yes, sir."

Toya realized he couldn't keep obsessing over Hodaka. If Toya let the man disturb his way of doing his job, it would disrupt everything.

At last, the meeting ended and Toya clapped his notebook shut and stood up from his seat. As he was leaving the room, Makihara called him back.

"Is something wrong, Sakurai? You're even quieter than usual today."

Toya tilted his head slightly. "Am I?"

The majority of the editors had already left the room; only Toya and Makihara were left. Every Wednesday at five o'clock, they had a departmental meeting. The only time Toya ever spoke up was when he had an opinion to express.

"You've looked kind of depressed lately. Is something wrong?"

"You should stop putting so much pressure on me and give me some vacation!"

"Sorry. It's only because I know what you're capable of."

"I'm sorry. Do I really look that bad?"

"You look much more down than usual."

More than likely, some of the other editors had said that Toya, usually so mild-mannered and courteous, was looking down. But there was no ill will in what Makihara said. He was only concerned, so Toya apologized.

"You don't need to apologize," Makihara said. "I was just making an observation. I can't stand to see you looking so wrapped up in your thoughts. People only do that when there's something bothering them. Don't let it get too bad."

That reminded Toya that when he had been suffering from his infatuation with Hodaka, Makihara had been the first to notice. Realizing he had to be careful of the man's astuteness, Toya smiled.

"I'm fine. I feel bad for making you worry over nothing."

"Well then, sorry I brought it up." Makihara clapped Toya lightly on the back and Toya let the momentum of it carry him out of the room.

Maybe he was being selfish by not wanting anyone else to know about Hodaka. Maybe he was a coward. Trying to keep his work and private life separate, he had been unable to talk to anyone about his relationship with the person who drove him so deeply into his own thoughts. The truth was the hardest part for Toya. It trapped him in a downward spiral.

Sitting at his desk again, Toya took a breath and leaned back in his chair. The steel chair creaked, echoing the pain of his heart which could find no escape.

Toya turned his computer back on and launched

his e-mail program. The e-mail retrieval animation looped and finally announced three new messages. The first was a reply from an author he had been sending cover designs to. The author had asked for something a little more lifeless and described concretely the color scheme he wanted. It would probably be easier to deal with over the phone.

The next message was from Amano. The subject line simultaneously gave Toya a bad feeling and a momentary rush. Amano was asking for advice. Preparing himself for the worst, Toya double-clicked on the message, but it described an incredibly simple problem that almost disappointed Toya: "I need to find something out for a plot point in the book. Would you come with me to do the research?"

Toya first thought Amano didn't really need to have him go along, but Amano was going to a mountainous area of Nagano prefecture and it looked like he needed to go by car. Looking over the map and other information in the attached files, Toya realized that it would be difficult to go alone. Figuring that no one else could accompany Amano to such a remote place, Toya accepted the invitation.

But since Amano had no track record with Sozan Publishing, Toya didn't think his boss Makihara would give Toya the go-ahead to accompany him for research. A popular author like Hodaka would be no problem, but Amano was so new. If it were somewhere close to Tokyo, maybe; but they were going to a mountain village in Nagano where they would have to spend at least one night in a hotel, and possibly two.

If Toya could convince Makihara that Amano could better evoke the isolated mountain village where his story took place by getting a feel for the real thing, Makihara wouldn't be able to contradict that. And Toya couldn't deny that he felt a little repelled by Hodaka after he'd tried to subjugate him with his lust.

"Mister Makihara?" Toya called out.

Makihara looked up. "Yeah?"

"Could I take a day off next week?"

It would have been ideal to stay one night and two days and do the research over the weekend, but Toya had proofs to finalize by Monday and had to be at work on Sunday.

"Sure, but why do you want one all of a sudden?"

"I have some personal business to tend to. I thought I'd take a little break before we finalize the proofs on Monday."

"Good idea. If that cheers you up, I'm all for it. Go relax."

Toya smiled, reassured by his boss's instructions.

"I'm so glad you could come with me on this trip, Mister Sakurai!" Amano said excitedly as he opened a can of coffee. They were on a bullet train headed for Nagano.

"I was intrigued by this opportunity myself. I've been looking forward to doing some research as well," Toya said, and he wasn't just being polite. Before Amano had proposed the trip, Toya had been researching the

area because of his interest in the local folk customs. Toya had been the one to suggest they stay two nights and three days.

"I really wasn't sure you'd accept."

Toya thought that showed how brave Amano could be. He had expected rejection, but had tried anyway. Toya didn't think he could do the same.

No—he could remember doing it once.

When he had confessed his feelings to Hodaka, he had been desperate enough to throw away everything. He could still vividly recall that feeling, like it had only happened yesterday.

"We're renting a car when we get to the station, right?"

"That's right. I reserved one for three days."

They had both agreed that it would be better to rent a car since only a few trains ran each day on the local lines from Nagano. Once that had been decided, Toya had left the details of making reservations at the inn up to Amano. Amano's research had been done with amazing efficiency, but that was only to be expected, since the research was going to benefit Amano's own story. Still, Amano's skill and efficiency impressed Toya.

"Did you find anything interesting up here?" Toya asked.

"I think the area's really famous with railroad buffs. Most people don't use the trains, and none of the stations have conductors, so it's kind of strange."

"I didn't know that," Toya said.

"Most people don't," Amano said with amusement.

"But I'm so glad you're here with me. It's so different seeing you wear something besides a suit. Of course, I'm the same as ever."

"I'd get much too hot if I went out in a suit at this time of year."

"I didn't mean that," Amano laughed brightly. He seemed to be the kind of person who didn't worry too much about switching between business and personal.

Hodaka was different. He drew a clear difference between the two, between being *on* and being *off*. He hated to talk about work during the off times and *really* hated to bring his private life into the on times. It was very logical, to the point where his almost inhuman logic made it hard to believe that he could feel jealousy or possessiveness.

Kai Hodaka was unlike anyone else, and Toya wanted him to be superhuman forever. That made the things Hodaka had said the other day especially cutting: they didn't sound like something Hodaka would say.

Toya didn't want to see Hodaka like that, but his desire for Hodaka to be superhuman meant that Toya was refusing to understand the real man. That thought made everything even less clear.

"Mister Sakurai?"

Looking up in surprise, Toya's eyes fell on Amano, who was looking at him in concern.

"Oh—sorry. I just spaced out for a second."

Amano gave a slight nod as Toya struggled to bring himself back to normal.

"I'm sorry for bothering you with a whim like this. I'm sure you must be busy."

Seeing the remorse on Amano's face, Toya started to feel bad. The problem with Hodaka that plagued Toya's heart didn't belong there. But considering the fact that Amano was the cause for his argument with Hodaka, Toya couldn't quite shake his concern. What if Hodaka happened to find out about the trip?

The research trip *was* necessary for work, so Toya wasn't actually breaking his promise not to see Amano outside of work. But since Toya had decided to take the trip without getting permission from Makihara, it might be hard for someone else to see it as business. If Hodaka found out about it and confronted Toya, he couldn't defend himself.

I'm an idiot.

Worn out by his thoughts, Toya sighed inwardly. He didn't expect Hodaka to find out about his trip. If Toya didn't tell him, there wouldn't be any problem.

"Have you talked to anyone else about this trip, Mister Amano?"

"Why do you ask?"

"The truth is I didn't think my boss would give me permission to come, so I took a day off to do this on my own. I'd like for you to avoid mentioning it to other people, if you don't mind."

Toya thought it was a weak explanation, but the young author who still didn't know much about the world seemed satisfied. Amano almost looked sorry about it.

"Did you really do that?"

"Yes. I'm putting aside some unfinished work to do this, so that's why I ask."

"Won't you get in trouble for taking a day off to do this for me?"

"I said I was taking a vacation to relax. So I'd like the research part of it to be a secret."

Amano nodded meekly.

"But today we're still going to the local history museum and the library as we discussed. I want to find out more about the area."

"All right."

Maybe it would have been better to join Amano on the second day. Toya considered that, but on the other hand, he really did want a little time to take it easy.

"Wow, what an incredible view!"

Watching Amano lean over the station's railing, Toya felt a chill. It wasn't just the cool June air of Nagano that sent a thrill down his spine, though it was quite the contrast to the humid oppression of the rainy season in Tokyo. Toya hadn't realized that the station they were going to was in such a terrifying place from the documents Amano had sent.

"Mister Amano, please be careful. A fall like that would kill you."

"I bet it would. It's so amazing!"

They were in the southern part of Nagano prefecture, at a train station on Japan Rail's Iida line that was situated in a pass between sharply rising mountains. Toya had been all over the map on research projects, but it was the first time that he had found an isolated place.

The second day of their trip was blessed with perfect weather and cool temperatures—ideal conditions. They woke up early and left their hotel to pick up the rental car and head to their destination. Amano wanted to stop and look at everything along the way, but Toya just wanted to wrap up the specific research they had to do. But since he had taken the trip for himself, he thought there was something to be gained from taking things more slowly.

"Maybe we should have come by train after all. This road is pathetic."

It was a switchback road. They had known it would be a hard drive and so had rented a compact car. But considering that one mistake could send them over the shoulder, it would have been much easier to take the train.

They first visited an unattended station, open to the elements. From the platform, they could only see two houses nearby. Toya found it odd that Amano knew about the station at all, since he had no real interest in trains. It was probably that trait typical of authors, whose instincts for new information pulled them in strange new directions. They spent the day walking around gathering information. Toya, who spent most of his time sitting at a desk, was exhausted by the end of it. But Amano was young and had energy to spare, so he volunteered to drive them back.

When Toya thought back on the terrifyingly narrow road, he wondered why they had dared to drive on it at all. There were curves so sharp that the steering wheel wouldn't turn any further and it seemed as if they

would go hurtling headlong over the mountainside. The stress kept them from talking very much.

"I didn't expect it to be that amazing. It really shocked me. Are you tired, Mister Sakurai?"

Once they'd reached the village center, Amano's voice started to sound more cheerful, as if he was calming down. They had managed to end the second day of their research trip safely.

Sometimes Amano's carefree attitude made Toya smile and helped create a reasonably laid back atmosphere. If he had been on a research trip with a famous author, Toya was sure he would be more stressed.

"And now, to celebrate the success of today's research, we're staying at an inn," Amano said.

On their first night, they had stayed at a business hotel relatively close to the train station, but apparently Amano had splurged to reserve a room at an inn. Toya decided that even if Amano called it an "inn," it was probably just someone's house. But as Toya looked out the passenger side window, Amano turned into the parking lot of a noticeably upscale building.

"Is this it?"

The building was impressive and the gated wall was of higher quality than any Toya had seen before. Were they staying at such a high-class inn? He was sure there must have been some mistake, but Amano turned to him and shouted, "This is it!"

Getting nervous, Toya hurried to catch up with Amano, who swept the front door open with a rattle.

"Welcome, sirs. Do you have a reservation?"

The woman's cool voice gave Toya a start. He glanced over at her: a hostess in a prim kimono, walking towards them.

"Yes, under the name Amano."

"We've been expecting you, sir. Please follow me."

The hostess greeted the two cheerfully and extended her hand to take their shoes.

"Thank you, ma'am." Amano gave a polite bow.

"Your room is this way."

Toya could see at a glance that the inn was the height of luxury and it made him more and more uncomfortable. He wondered if his wallet could take the hit.

The hostess led them to what she called the Cherry Blossom Room, a short walk from the main building. There was a small entrance area right inside where the hostess set their shoes, and then she pulled the inner door open, revealing a spacious tatami room. One section was the sitting room, the other the bedroom.

"Wow, it's huge!" Amano shouted in a voice of childlike excitement.

Toya, on the other hand, fell silent. He couldn't help but think the place was more luxurious than they needed. There was even a private bathroom attached to their room made of cypress wood.

"The bath is open from five in the afternoon until midnight, and five in the morning until noon."

"So we can use it now?"

"Yes, sir. When would you like to have your dinner served?"

"Around seven."

"I think you'll have a wonderful soak, then."

"Let's get going!" Amano cried cheerfully.

"I'll bring you some tea and you can register in the meantime."

"Sure."

The price Amano had originally told Toya for a one night stay at an inn was ten thousand yen, and that was on a weekday during the off season. Toya knew that wouldn't be enough to pay for a room like theirs, but he couldn't very well start questioning Amano about the price in front of the hostess, so Toya stayed quiet.

Toya sipped from the cup of aromatic green tea set out, wetting his dry lips and throat. Amano scribbled out his address and handed the form back to the hostess.

"I'll let you two enjoy yourselves, then."

They waited as the woman withdrew from the room with an easy smile, then Toya whispered, "I'm not sure how I should put this, Mister Amano, but...isn't this inn way too expensive?"

"Oh, you noticed?" he replied nonchalantly. Toya was a little surprised. Amano broke into a wide grin. "Actually, a friend of mine from college owns this place, so I got a little discount. He's the one who told me about that train station we went to today."

"Oh, so then..."

Of course if Amano's friend owned the property, he would have gotten a good discount, though Toya suspected that the price was still absurd. Apparently Amano read Toya's thoughts on his face and he stuck his tongue out teasingly.

"When I talked to him, I told him I was going to be staying here with someone special. I guess that got him. I didn't know he'd put us in our own wing, though. Nice, huh?"

"You said I was someone special?"

Certainly Amano and Toya had a business relationship, so that could make him special. Toya smirked inwardly at the overblown statement, but it struck him as an Amano thing to say, so he didn't feel the need to pursue it any further. Besides, they had an impressive view of the garden from their window, even though the light was fading.

"We still have time before dinner, Mister Sakurai. Do you want to take a bath before we eat?"

"What, together?"

Amano burst out laughing at Toya's frozen, terrified expression.

"Well, it *is* a resort. It wouldn't be much fun to go alone."

It was the first moment that Toya felt glad that he hadn't seen Hodaka lately. If Hodaka had burned his marks of ownership into Toya's skin, they never would have faded in time. A woman might be able to get away with it, but if a clever person saw the marks on Toya's skin, they would figure out that they were hickeys.

"Come on, let's go."

"Okay," Toya accepted grudgingly. It would have been stranger to refuse and Toya didn't want Amano to think he was weird.

The inn was famous for two things: its food and its open-air bath, which boasted beautiful scenery, clean

water, and a spectacular view.

Toya washed himself down and got into the water ahead of Amano, then let out a deep breath. There was no one else in the men's baths, probably because it was still so early. The water was the perfect temperature, soaking slowly into Toya's body to relax him. Toya didn't usually show much interest in bath resorts, but he discovered they quickly healed his fatigue from the day. He could just imagine how Hodaka would react if he invited him to one. Turning that unlikely scenario over in his mind, Toya felt increasingly lonely.

"Whoa! You're really pale, Mister Sakurai."

Amano had gotten into the water and come up behind Toya, murmuring in an impressed voice.

"Do I? Somehow, that doesn't sound like a compliment."

"Come on! Any woman would love to be in your shoes. Just look."

Amano lifted Toya's right hand and held his own hand next to it. Next to Amano's tanned skin, Toya's was ashen and almost unhealthy looking.

"That's just because you've got a tan, Mister Amano."

"But look, your cheek is pink, too. Or maybe it's more of a cherry blossom blush. I guess your name really fits you, Mister Sakurai—or should I say, Mister Cherry Blossom?"

"I've heard that one before."

"Hey, and isn't our room the Cherry Blossom Room?"

The doors of the outdoor bath opened and their

eyes met a middle-aged man on his way in. His eyes swept over Toya as if he were sizing him up. Toya looked away from the man with an unpleasant expression.

"He's coming on to you," Amano said.

"What?"

Toya looked up at the unexpected shrewdness of Amano's observation. His eyes met a surprisingly serious expression. Somehow Amano had picked up on the meaning of the man's glance.

"You're gorgeous, Mister Sakurai. I think there are a lot of men who'd be interested in you."

"Isn't 'gorgeous' something you'd call a girl you were trying to pick up?"

"But 'handsome' isn't quite...no, I definitely have to go with 'gorgeous' to describe you."

"I'd expect something a little more literary."

"That makes it harder. What if I said that words could not possibly describe you?"

"Let's just drop it. You're a handful." Toya grinned at Amano and shook his head.

Toya looked at Amano, the young man who was nearly inspirational with his cheerful, innocent, and mysterious youth. It was fair to say that the majority of people who wrote novels were gloomy characters, but there was none of that darkness in Amano. That uncanny cheerfulness no doubt contributed to the charm of his writing.

"Do you always stare at people that intensely, Mister Sakurai?"

"Huh?"

"When you talk to me, you look me in the eyes for

a really long time. You hardly even blink.”

“I-I never noticed. I’m sorry.”

“It makes me nervous—but no more so than how gorgeous you are. Did you ever live abroad?”

“I am a pure product of Japan.”

Amano burst out laughing, as if Toya’s expression had amused him.

“But you ought to be careful. I’m sure there are some guys who could get the wrong idea about you.”

So that was why Hodaka had reproached Toya about his gaze. Toya didn’t know how he could have gotten so old without ever realizing his habit of staring at people. He could believe that there were people out there who would pick a fight with him over it and that it might get him into trouble. Toya had to smile at the idea that Hodaka might have been worried about him.

He just doesn’t understand.

Hodaka was the only one Toya wanted to look at for the rest of his life. He would never glance at anyone else in that way. He only had eyes for Hodaka.

People would probably laugh at Toya’s foolishness for falling so hard in love. He was like a child. But that was how much Toya loved Hodaka. So it hurt that Hodaka didn’t understand him. Anxiety weighed on Toya as he wondered how he could possibly get Hodaka to understand him. Even then, Hodaka was all Toya thought about. He longed for the feel of Hodaka’s skin and the warmth of his body.

“I think I’m getting light-headed. I’m going to get out.”

“Me, too.”

Toya wrapped a *yukata* around his body, brought with him from the room, and Amano whistled.

“Sexy!”

Amano was still talking about Toya as if he was a woman, with that string of compliments like “gorgeous” and “sexy.” Did he expect Toya to enjoy it? Toya flushed, not knowing quite what to do about it. He blamed it on staying in the hot water too long.

When they got back to the room, the hostess was bustling about cheerfully, setting out their dinner.

“Do you want to get some saké? They have a contract with a local distillery here, so it’s all very good and fresh.”

“That’s true,” the hostess said. “Our saké is very popular. It has a crisp taste, and even people who say they hate saké drink ours right up. A lot of people take it home as a souvenir.”

It was impossible to refuse after seeing Amano’s impassioned attention to the hostess’ speech. Toya agreed to try some.

“I’m glad we got all the research squared away. Do you think it’ll bring more life to your story?” Toya asked,

“Oh definitely, but first, a drink!” Amano laughed brightly and drained his cup.

Reluctantly following his lead, Toya brought a cup to his lips as well. “This is good—!” Toya exclaimed in open wonder.

The saké had an excellent aroma and went down crisp and easy. It would be very easy to drink too much of it if Toya wasn't careful.

"This is really great," Amano agreed. "It's got a good body and I don't know why, but it doesn't usually give you a hangover. I always wind up drinking way too much."

"I'll be careful."

Toya couldn't hold his alcohol very well under normal circumstances. If he didn't pay close attention, he could very easily wind up drunk in front of the new author.

"You always do exhaustive research for your books, don't you?" Toya asked.

"I suppose. I guess it's a bad habit of mine. If I get something wrong in my books, I just can't let it go. It bugs me. People tease me about being more serious than I look."

"You really are very serious. But I think it's a good thing to go after the truth."

"Oh, it's not that noble."

"Mister Hodaka does the same thing."

Amano looked impressed at the casual mention of Hodaka's name. "Really?"

"Well, I've only worked with him on one book so far, so I'm not an authority," Toya said evasively, not wanting to get stuck in an awkward position.

Toya had been in and out of Hodaka's house so many times that he knew better than anyone how much background reading went into a single story. Hodaka's elaborate stories and the unique rhythm of his

beautiful style could only be what they were because of his successful research. They depended on staggering amounts of reading and knowledge. Hodaka never devalued so much as a single sentence of his writing. If there was something he didn't know, he wouldn't hesitate to use his connections to find it out from others.

"Has Mister Hodaka started his next book yet?"

"No, unfortunately." Toya shook his head at the question, accepting the refill of saké Amano offered him with.

"Well, he's going to have a hard time writing something with as much impact as *Emergence*. Besides, he doesn't usually publish many books in a row with the same company."

"That's his policy. If he published too frequently, his popularity and quality would go down. Instead he takes his time to grapple with each work individually."

"Wow, so he even keeps his marketing under control?"

Toya could feel himself becoming rapidly intoxicated by the chilled saké. The relaxing conversation after the exhausting tension of their drive that afternoon distracted him so much that he didn't notice how much he was drinking. In no time, they had emptied two bottles.

"Uh-oh. We need a refill," Amano said.

Toya leaned back in his chair while Amano called up the front desk. A thin membrane seemed to gently stretch over Toya's entire body, as if he were falling into a peaceful sleep. He knew it was wrong, but his body was so heavy that he couldn't move.

"Mister Sakurai?" Toya heard someone calling to him from far away. "Are you asleep?"

Toya heard a familiar melody. He recognized it as the ring tone on his cell phone, but his body wouldn't even twitch.

"Mister Sakurai, your phone's ringing. I don't think it's just a message."

"Nngh." Toya wanted to move, but he couldn't budge even a single finger. "Pick it up..." he asked.

"I couldn't answer your phone. What should I do?"

The chime started playing again, then Toya heard a distant voice. Listening to the pleasant rhythm of it, Toya was lulled once more into sleep.

"...so you should probably call back later."

Toya couldn't quite understand what the person said and couldn't respond. Silence filled him. He felt his body being lifted, as if on a cloud. It carried Toya to a soft bed and laid him down respectfully.

"Mister Sakurai?"

Toya's lips didn't move. His eyelids were heavy, holding his eyes closed as if they were glued shut. All he wanted was to let his sluggish body collapse. Nothing more.

There was a moment of silence. Fingers touched Toya's lips lightly, teasingly, then someone's moist lips pressed against Toya's own. Unable to breathe with his lips blocked by someone else's, Toya let out a muffled noise. He was given several light kisses, and he felt the sensuality that slept inside him stirring.

Finally, a powerful tongue pushed its way through

his slightly twisted lips.

"Mmf!"

The kiss was much more intimate than a simple prank. Toya felt his brain going numb from it.

It's Hodaka.

Toya reached out with weak fingers and found the warmth and solidity of the other person. No one but Hodaka would kiss him so tenderly. But what was Hodaka doing there? It had to be a dream.

Eyes closed, Toya sank into the dream, tangling his tongue with the other person's, sucking on his lips. His tongue met the man's own, exploring the inside of his mouth and tracing over his teeth.

"Nngh—"

The other person's tongue gently trailed across the roof of his mouth and Toya felt his body seized with sensation, and he knew he was getting wet. In the blink of an eye, his sex had flushed with warmth.

"Oh, sir—" Toya whispered between kisses, wrapping his arms around the other person's neck.

"Is this really okay with you?"

"Do it—"

Toya's heart and body had left his self-control far behind. He didn't mind at all when a clumsy hand slipped into the opening of his yukata, stroking his thigh from groin to knee.

"Mm."

Toya's voice was luscious. He hung from the man's neck and buried his face in his shoulder, unable to bear the pleasure.

"Ah! Nngh!"

Toya's desire could no longer be concealed. Seeping out of him was a juice sweeter than honey, welling up from inside his body. Impatient with the hesitant movements of the man's fingers, Toya begged for more in a cloying voice.

"Do it right. That's good—"

Toya didn't want to be touched with such restraint, through his clothes. He didn't want to be stirred up anymore, he wanted more; to be driven wild and to cry out from the feverish caresses.

"Mister...Hodaka," Toya urged, slurring. He hardly ever called Hodaka by name—usually he just said "sir"—but it was just a dream and he could say whatever he wanted.

"Hodaka?"

Toya felt the man holding him pull away suddenly and that was when he realized it wasn't a dream. He was summoned back from the depths of slumber with a terrible swiftness. It was a horrible way to wake up. Toya was stretched out beside Amano, his yukata disheveled and his lower body shamefully exposed.

"Mister Amano!" Toya gasped, and felt the blood drain from his body. "Wait—stop, please!"

"Huh?"

"I'm sorry, I-I don't know. I was half asleep."

What had he done? Toya was disoriented by the sudden turn in events. He was quickly approaching panic. He pushed Amano off with all his strength and for the first time, Amano's surprise seemed to clear into understanding.

"I'm sorry, Mister Sakurai," Amano said in quiet



apology. "I wanted to kiss you so much and..."

Toya was pulling the two sides of his yukata together. He could only bow his head with embarrassment.

"I'm sorry. I was way out of line," Amano said.

"No—I apologize to you. I was drunk and did some stupid things." Toya found it impressive that he managed to move his dry tongue and lips enough to speak.

"I think I let myself get a little carried away, too." Amano said.

Toya felt extremely uncomfortable having a younger man apologizing so fervently to him. Amano had made the first move, but Toya couldn't ignore the fact that he had been the one to escalate it from an innocent kiss. It wasn't right for Amano to apologize to him.

"I've wanted to get to know you better for a long time, Mister Sakurai. I'm gay."

That sudden confession rendered Toya speechless. He had no idea how to respond to it. Amano said the words so easily, but they were so serious.

"It didn't even occur to me that I could have been wrong about you. I got cocky."

Toya found the sincerity of Amano's apology painful. Responding physically the way he had to Amano's kiss, Toya felt he had given Amano an invitation. It was no wonder Amano had gotten the wrong idea.

"I really am sorry," Toya said, feeling more miserable than embarrassed. He was pathetic.

"No, I knew how drunk you were. But don't worry. I'm not the kind of creep who'd try to force someone to do something when they're drunk."

It was hard for Toya to lower his guard against a man who had confessed to being gay. But he knew he had no choice except to trust him, so Toya relaxed and sat up in his futon. Some semblance of calm had returned, but his interrupted passion lingered still inside his body. Toya squeezed his eyes shut as he sat on top of the futon, trying to make it dissipate.

"Are you all right?" Amano asked.

"...Yes."

"Can I do anything for you?" Amano whispered, kneeling behind Toya.

Toya noticed a sexual nuance in Amano's words, and he felt a trembling tingle of desire in the core of his body.

"No—I'm fine, really."

"I don't mind being compared to Kai Hodaka."

Those words were all it took to freeze Toya's body in a tense shock of surprise.

"You've got the wrong idea! I'm not involved with him in that way!"

"I can't believe you, Mister Sakurai. You're sleeping with Kai Hodaka, aren't you?"

Amano's straightforward words were empty of blame and more effective than the longest diatribe. They were especially effective for a person like Toya, who was more afraid of his relationship with Hodaka being made public than anything else.

"You feel hurt by this, don't you?" Amano asked.

"I can't just ignore that, whatever you say. I have a responsibility here."

Toya knew that, too. Even then, his body keenly desired Amano's touches. If Toya had drunk just a little bit more, he might have even gone after Amano, without any concern for appearances. Still, he rejected Amano's words, bunching the fabric of the futon in his fists. "You can't say something like that!"

Amano wrapped his arms around Toya from behind, rubbing him tenderly.

"I-I'm sorry. I've been making things hard for you for a while, I think," Amano said, his tone of voice changing suddenly, startlingly calm.

"Mister Amano?"

"How could I ever believe that I could take someone else's place? Especially Kai Hodaka's?"

Toya's body stiffened, feeling as if knives were digging into his heart. Amano had a point. There were very few people who couldn't be replaced by someone else, but Toya was sure the world was full of people who could replace him. Hodaka wasn't like that though. Toya didn't have Hodaka's dazzling genius. Toya was one of the little people, not even worth noticing.

"You were just so beautiful and sexy—I was insensitive. I'm sorry. I won't do anything like that again, so please don't worry."

Toya turned around in a daze, staring into Amano's eyes to determine the sincerity of what he said.

"But I told you that you can't look at people like that. It isn't fair," Amano said with a rueful smile as he stood up and pulled his futon a few feet away.

He sat down on top of it.

What should I do?

When Toya finally calmed down, he felt overwhelmed by the latest twist that reality had thrust upon him. Worst of all, Hodaka and everyone else in the business would find out. The secret that Toya had tried so hard to hide from the world was about to be revealed to everyone due to his own lack of caution. And it had happened with someone Hodaka had emphatically told him not to see. Ironically, that had enticed Toya's passion.

"Mister Amano? Um, about what I said—"

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone."

Toya felt a soaring lift in his spirits as Amano suddenly granted him the promise of salvation he had prayed for.

"Really?"

Toya had just verified his physical relationship with Hodaka, but all he could do was grasp at Amano's words.

"I promise. I care about you too, Mister Sakurai."

Toya wasn't sure how to take that. Amano gave him an innocent smile.

"Plus, I need you as my editor. I don't want to see you get hurt by ugly rumors."

Toya couldn't quite take the words of the young man before him at face value. But for the moment, he had no choice but to cling to the frail hope of Amano's sincerity. If Toya seemed too dubious, it might annoy Amano.

"I'm grateful to you for discovering me, Mister

Sakurai. I won't do anything underhanded. I hope you can trust me."

How could Toya respond to that? Unable to decide, Toya could only nod.

"I'm going to go brush my teeth," Amano said, leaving the room.

Sitting alone, Toya brought calm back to his flushed body. He cursed himself for being so unguarded. When he stood up, he felt more relieved and went to the bathroom, crossing paths with Amano who was on his way out.

Toya splashed his face again and again with cold water before going back to the room. Amano was sitting on his futon, facing away from the door. The lights in the room were still blindingly bright. Toya sensed Amano's consideration for him, and finally his tension began to ease.

"Goodnight," Toya said.

There was no answer, so Toya turned off the light and burrowed into his futon, but instead of peaceful breathing he heard Amano's voice, trembling quietly against his eardrums.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Okay."

"What is it that you like about Kai Hodaka?"

"Huh?"

"Well, I mean, you're going out with him. He just seems so perfect. Like it would be impossible for a regular guy like me to even get near him. I guess he seems sort of cold or distant."

"Mister Hodaka is kind."

Hodaka seemed cold, but he was more than that. He had a little sympathy and consideration, too. Toya just wished that the man would show more signs of it. The incompetent salad Hodaka had once made for Toya after he spent the night was a good example. Hodaka wasn't a morning person, but he had gotten up earlier than Toya to make breakfast.

Maybe Toya was a fool for being unable to feel anything but love for Hodaka.

"So then you really are sleeping with Hodaka?"

Unable to answer, Toya remained silent.

"Are you asleep?" Amano's voice lingered in the secretive darkness.

Chapter Six

When Toya stepped out of the train station, a fine mist of water droplets fell around him, as if the shower had just started running. The rainy season hadn't yet broken, which led to a series of damp, humid days.

Toya's mind still hadn't cleared from the research trip he'd taken with Amano, and the worst part was that he had leaked his secret to someone who never should have found out. The calmer he got, the deeper the realization sank in of how badly he had screwed up.

Several uneventful days went by. Amano was being considerate and avoided conversations about Hodaka. But if he ever said just a few words about Hodaka, Toya wouldn't be able to handle it. He couldn't even look forward to Amano's completed draft without tension.

Toya was plagued by a gloom he didn't know how to shake. It was giving him stomach pain and torturing him with anxiety. On top of that, he was running out of time to ask Hodaka for another book. He had put off the confrontation for three months already. Hodaka could write fast, but if they wanted to publish something new within the year, Toya had to get to work.

"Haven't seen you in a while," Hodaka said coldly, gazing at Toya, who stood outside his door.

"I apologize. I've had my hands full lately."

"I see. Come in."

Seeing each other again after so long, Toya found Hodaka's arrogance almost comforting. Aware of its effect on him, Toya fought back the sudden impulse to cling to Hodaka. He'd come for business. They could discuss private matters later.

Toya had been away from Hodaka's condo for a long time, but the quiet seemed to be even more commanding than ever. It was as if the rooms reflected the silent soul of Kai Hodaka, the man who ruled over the place. There was no one in the world who could disrupt the calm of Hodaka's heart. Not even Toya.

"What brings you here today?" Hodaka asked, gesturing for Toya to take a seat on the sofa.

The maid came in immediately, bowed her head to Toya, and placed a cup of coffee in front of him.

"I'm here on business. We were wondering if you would be able to start work on your next project for our company soon."

Once Toya had steadied himself, the words came out much more easily than he'd expected.

"And?"

"Earlier you told me that you had sketched an outline for a sequel to *Emergence*. Do you think you could write that? We'd be hoping to publish within the year."

"Within the year, huh?"

That was all Hodaka said. The silence was heavy. Thanks to the year that Toya had been with Hodaka, Toya could tell the other man wasn't in a very good mood. But he couldn't figure out why. Toya suspected that he had

said something wrong, but he couldn't be sure.

"Isn't there something else you want to talk to me about before that?" Hodaka asked.

"What do you mean?" Toya inclined his head slightly.

Despite not having met face to face to talk for so long, Toya had been diligently keeping in touch over e-mail. As far as he knew, there was nothing that he needed to tell Hodaka.

"I can't think of anything," he said after some thought.

"I see," Hodaka murmured quietly, a slight smile twisting his lips. "Let's discuss the matter of writing a sequel first, then."

"Thank you, sir!"

Relief flooded Toya, but before his heart had time to bask in its joy, Hodaka continued. "Oh, but there's a condition."

"A condition?"

"We'll play pool again, like before. If I win, I get your body, and if I happen to lose, I'll write a fixed number of pages for the draft. How does that sound?"

Toya felt as if Hodaka had lodged a spear into his chest. Why was Hodaka talking about an exchange all of a sudden? For his first book with Hodaka, Toya had taken the bet as a last resort because he wanted Hodaka's manuscript so badly. But once more, the man was telling him to put his body on the line as a tool for his job, not as a lover.

"Either way, I'd be bending my policy for you again. That's why I thought I should use the same

condition as last time. Don't you like the idea?"

Toya was struck speechless as Hodaka delivered another blow with utter aplomb.

"Why would you do that?" Toya finally managed to wring out a small protest.

"I just explained why. Your comprehension skills are as weak as ever."

"You know that's not the problem!" After shock came a strong anger. Toya's voice was harsh, trembling with his mounting rage, and he stopped speaking. He gazed back into Hodaka's pitch black eyes. Toya would never find an answer there.

"Are you in or not? We're not here to explore my reasons for betting, just to accept or decline."

The frigid rationality of Hodaka's words rubbed Toya the wrong way. His anger, which demanded the right to interrogate Hodaka, rose into his throat. But as Toya gazed into Hodaka's cold eyes, his anger gradually transformed into resignation. Nothing he said could have any effect on Hodaka when the man looked like that. Toya knew that much. For him, it was business. He wasn't after his lover's body.

"Very well." Toya's voice sounded thin as he answered.

"Then it's a deal."

There wasn't the slightest hint of affection in Hodaka's voice, only an indifferent cruelty that unnerved Toya. At times like that, Toya witnessed the coldness of the man named Kai Hodaka.

Feeling as if he were treading across thin ice, Toya walked toward Hodaka, his hands reaching for him. But

Hodaka turned away and prevented him from touching him.

What was Hodaka so angry about? If he wouldn't tell Toya why he was upset, how was Toya supposed to know?

But Hodaka didn't even give Toya time to ask the question. He was led into the game room and took off his jacket, preparing himself for the worst. He accepted a cue from Hodaka, who hung his jacket on the back of a chair.

"We'll do three games of nine-ball. The first to win two games wins."

"All right."

There are many ways to play pool. One of those is nine-ball, a simple game where the players must strike balls numbered one through nine and knock them into the side pockets in order. No matter how the game goes, the person who drops the nine-ball is the winner, so even if one player hit the eight other balls, the player to score the final ball would win.

Toya had some experience with playing pool, but he was no match for Hodaka, who played at a professional level. His amateurish struggles were due to his strong desire to read a new creation by Hodaka, and also his pride, which refused to be trampled on by Hodaka.

"You can start," Hodaka said.

Toya glanced at Hodaka, but he didn't read any emotion on Hodaka's face. That cut sharply at Toya's heart, so Toya started the game, and even he found it easy enough to drop the one-ball during his break shot,

and then the two-ball, but he failed to sink the three-ball. Perhaps it was a sign of his dulled skills. He anticipated defeat.

Just as expected, Hodaka easily sank balls four through nine. Following that, he then dominated the next game completely. There was no need for the third contest since Hodaka had won two in a row.

"And that's the game. Looks like you haven't been practicing."

"I didn't see any reason to."

"You're going to have to practice hard for next time."

Toya hung his head, biting his lip in consternation at Hodaka's heartless pronunciation. The man was implying that their ridiculous bet was going to continue.

"I suppose it's time to collect your body as my reward."

"Yes, sir."

Toya signaled his agreement in a frail voice, giving a slight nod. Even the things that would have filled him with joy before as the acts of a lover brought him no excitement anymore, only fear. Hodaka's eyes held a piercing light, and that was more frightening than anything else.

"Come with me," Hodaka said as he pulled Toya away by the arm.

Toya walked down the hallway behind Hodaka, feeling as if his feet were going to tangle beneath him. Hodaka opened the door to his master bedroom, the door at the end of the hallway. Only after Hodaka had closed

the door did he release Toya's arm. He sat down on his king-size bed.

"Come here."

Hodaka jerked his chin at Toya, who still stood before the closed door in a daze. Even an arrogant gesture like that could be made elegant by Hodaka. Toya had no right to resist whatsoever. He took a few heavy steps forward to stand in front of Hodaka.

"Go down on me," Hodaka ordered.

Toya's eyes widened slightly. The cold light suffusing Hodaka's eyes as Toya looked down at him, told him that the man wasn't joking. Toya felt his heart being crushed by wretchedness and despair. But since he had lost the bet with Hodaka there was nothing he could do. Losing meant doing exactly what Hodaka told him to do. Toya knelt down hesitantly, removing his necktie with one hand.

"You're at work, aren't you? Just loosen it."

"What—?"

"Your job right now is to sell your body."

Toya's cheeks flushed with anger, but he forced the feelings back. His throat felt tight, so he only undid a single button of his shirt. With shaking fingers, Toya pulled down the zipper of Hodaka's pants and drew his manhood out from the gap in his underwear. If he had been acting as a lover, Toya wouldn't have hesitated. But Hodaka had told him that it was part of his job, and he faltered. Toya lacked the decisiveness to simply take Hodaka into his mouth all at once, so he just held it in his hand. "What's wrong? I don't like how you're holding back."

"L-let me do this."

"Do what?"

Toya finally noticed the cruel words that had begun the usual abuse.

"Let me service you," Toya's voice was hoarse, more so than he'd expected.

"You've been waiting to suck me off?"

"Yes, I have," Toya whispered, feeling ashamed of these words that flew in the face of his true feelings. He fought back the tears that threatened to fall.

"Kiss it."

Hodaka was doing everything he could to humiliate Toya. Toya pressed his lips gently against Hodaka's manhood, exactly as he was told. It was the ultimate proof of his submission. He dragged his tongue from the root to the tip, drooling. He was more concerned with making Hodaka feel good than wiping it off, but as his tongue circled it again and again, saliva dripped down his chin and trailed down his neck.

"Mm."

Toya's tongue quickly tired, growing numb at its root. But Hodaka's penis had still not begun reacting. All Toya had done was cover it in spit.

"Lick it like you enjoy it."

Toya couldn't do it. He started to protest, but Hodaka grabbed a fistful of his hair and thrust himself deep into Toya's throat.

"Ggh!"

Toya gagged instinctively at the intense attack. He couldn't hold his tears back any longer and they welled up in his eyes.

"If you're a whore, act like one. Figure out what you need to do to please me."

Hodaka spit out one humiliating insult after another, cutting away at Toya's pride and attacking his love.

Toya thought rubbing his lips over Hodaka's penis might excite him. He puckered his lips and moved his head back and forth; the man's girth swelled suddenly inside his mouth. It stretched the soft flesh of Toya's mouth and he too began to get excited.

"You're getting hard already? You have no stamina."

"No, I—"

Ashamed of being seen, Toya brought his knees up, but the man's insightful gaze exposed him. Toya couldn't hide himself.

"You like licking it, don't you? It makes you so happy."

Hodaka's taunting attacks kindled a fire deep in Toya's body, his aching passion lost without an outlet.

"Am I wrong?"

"No, I-I love it. So much—"

Saliva trailed from Toya's mouth, soaking his neck and chin as he said those things with no truth in his heart. Toya's technique was still clumsy and he couldn't respond to Hodaka's needs. But the amount of time he had spent carefully caressing it finally had an effect. Gradually the sweet taste of Hodaka's fluids suffused the tip of his tongue and Toya made an obscene sound as he licked it, which seemed to make the pleasure even better for Hodaka. Hodaka laughed derisively at the

sloppy noise of Toya's mouth moving over him and the mingling pool of saliva and other fluids that ran down Toya's face.

"Mm—nngh."

Toya's eyebrows knit together in pain as the organ began to swell and filled his mouth. His tongue felt heavy and it became harder to move it with any skill. But still, Toya continued his attentions, dedicated to bringing Hodaka satisfaction.

"Close your eyes," Hodaka whispered suddenly.

Toya obeyed before he had understood the order. Hodaka grabbed Toya's hair, pulling his head back. Hodaka's member was pulled free of Toya's lips. Toya felt it pull a thread of saliva from his mouth, almost desperately, before it broke.

A moment later, something hot splattered Toya's face. He opened his eyes in surprise.

"Ah—"

It was a few seconds before Toya realized that Hodaka had ejaculated onto his face. The thick fluid trailed across his features, carrying its distinctive scent with it as it dripped onto his knees, and then the floor.

He was being treated like an object.

"You're heartless," Toya said as he sat back on his heels, digging his nails painfully into his legs. He did it to keep the floodgates of his emotions from bursting open. He wanted to scold Hodaka.

"No, I'm not. You like being treated this way and you know it."

"No, I don't! I hate it!" Toya retorted, getting control of his breathing. He looked up at Hodaka without



even wiping the semen from his face. If he wiped it away, he would feel as if he had lost to Hodaka.

"Then take off your clothes. Let me see everything."

When Toya realized what Hodaka meant by that, scarlet spread across his face.

"I want you to prove that you hate doing these things. Because your body is much more honest than you are."

But Toya still had some willpower left. He couldn't surrender so easily to another person. It was in fact his will that had made him take the bet again.

"What's wrong? If you can't do it, I'll help you."

Toya reluctantly pulled his belt off and pulled his pants and underwear down to his hips. Thankfully, his button-up shirt prevented his nakedness from being exposed. But it was the only defense he had left.

"Your shirt is hiding what I want to see."

Toya's shoulders shook in surprise at Hodaka's statement.

"Let me see it."

Hodaka's order was gentle, but it had a forceful authority. After a bit of hesitation, Toya reluctantly lifted his shirt in his hands.

"So, you're already that far along."

It hurt Toya to hear the surprise in Hodaka's voice and he looked away, biting his lip. As he looked away, Hodaka yanked Toya onto the bed and spread his body out.

"No!"

In the unguarded moment of Toya's surprise,

Hodaka tore away the clothes that hung around Toya's thighs, leaving him with nothing but his shirt. The man lightly squeezed Toya's penis.

"You got this hard just having me in your mouth? You're so dirty."

"Wait!"

Hodaka's fingers moved with a firm intent, ripping Toya's pleasure out of him by tormenting him. Hodaka's fingers knew all the quirks of Toya's wet, twisted body.

"But you've already waited so long for me to take you. I'll give you a reward for that."

"No, I—!"

No one was more surprised than Toya to hear how sensual his own voice was when it was interrupted.

"You what? You mean you don't want to do anymore?" Contempt crept unexpectedly into Hodaka's voice. "In that case, you can just go home."

Toya looked up at him in shock. Was Hodaka actually letting him go?

"I'll call you a taxi."

When Toya saw Hodaka pick up the cordless phone on his nightstand, he let out a sigh of relief. "Are you really going to let me go?"

Hodaka grunted an assent with shocking detachment.

"In that case, could I borrow your shower?"

"Why? You look good like that. You should go home that way."

"Please be serious."

Hodaka smiled ever so slightly and gently traced the line of Toya's jaw from his temple down to his chin.

"Do you think I'm joking?"

"But—"

There was no way Toya could leave like that. He might be able to get his engorged body under control, but he wanted to wash the man's fluids off his face and hair first.

Why did Hodaka treat him like that? It was as if Toya was nothing more than a machine fitted with flesh to dispense pleasure.

Hodaka's fingers brushed Toya's ear and Toya shivered. That caused the passion he thought he'd gotten under control to reawaken, just a little. The harder he tried not to think about it, the more the dull sensation tortured Toya's body, and the more it excited him.

"What's wrong?" Hodaka asked.

It was too hard to speak. Toya shook his head and buried his face in the sheets. He curled into a fetal position and Hodaka squeezed his shoulder and whispered cruelly, "Leave. Everything's ready. Your work for today is done."

Hodaka was evil—unbelievably cruel. Whenever Hodaka's beautiful voice tickled its way into Toya's ears, he couldn't stop himself from shuddering. Toya shook his head, biting down hard on his lips. But he wouldn't be able to hold out for long.

"You did such a good job that I'm going to pay you back by not doing those things you hate."

That meant that until Toya said that he liked something, Hodaka wouldn't give him anything. Hodaka was trying to make Toya throw himself into the abyss of his desire by choice. Toya felt hopeless, but

abandoned in the middle of its pleasure, his body wanted Hodaka and began to ache anew. His body had grown pathetically sensitive.

"—me please."

"What did you say?"

"T-take me, please."

It took all of the seductive power Toya had in him to say that. Sprawled out face down on the bed, Toya twisted around to look back at Hodaka with an expression that seemed on the verge of screaming from pleasure.

"Is that how you begged the other guy to do it to you?"

"I've never done that."

"Oh really?" Hodaka whispered tauntingly. "I doubt you could stand to be without a man inside *here* for very long."

Hodaka gently stroked Toya's cleft. Toya gasped, unable to hold back his breath.

"All I did was touch you and you're already loose and ready."

It was exactly as Hodaka said. All he'd done was run his finger over the entrance to Toya's body, and that part of him was already obscenely eager to welcome a man inside. Toya was panting in his desire to feel that fullness. Hodaka had amused himself with Toya, but it had only made Toya want more.

"Toya."

If it was supposed to be for work, why was Hodaka calling his name so tenderly? The poignant strains in his voice brought those painful thoughts to Toya's mind.

But before savoring Hodaka's voice, Toya would make sure of his own pleasure.

"Is it better here?" Hodaka asked as his hands snaked around from behind to pinch Toya's nipples through the cloth of his shirt.

Surprised, Toya let out a heated cry. But as Hodaka pinched and massaged his stiffening nipples, his pleasure rapidly multiplied. He felt a prickling pain on his skin, the delicate stimulation snaking through his body, driving him insane.

"W-wait, sir—please."

"You're the one who can't wait."

Though Toya's member still hadn't been touched, it had grown, fluid dripping slowly from its tip. The nectar that welled up had already fallen to create a handful of stains on the sheets, flustering Toya.

"Touch your nipples yourself," Hodaka ordered.

Unable to resist, Toya hesitantly reached up to brush his fingers over his nipples, protected by the cloth of his shirt. They stood obscenely tall, prouder than seemed possible. Toya gasped at the strength of the sensation in pinching his own nipples.

"Ah! Ungh—"

"Do you always do that when you play?"

"Of—of course I don't!"

Toya couldn't stop playing with himself, despite Hodaka's gaze raking over him. Before he realized it, Toya was drunk with the feeling, chafing his nipples. His hips were trembling impatiently and a sweetly lethargic sensation nestled inside his genitals.

"Mm. Sir, please—"

"What do you want?"

"Touch me."

There was a part of Toya's body that Toya wanted to touch, but he didn't think it would be okay. If he wanted it to be touched, he had no choice but to beg Hodaka.

"Here?"

As Hodaka wrapped his fingers around Toya's penis, Toya felt his body melting away. But the gentle caressing passes of the man's hand weren't enough. Toya wanted it much, much harder and began to rub his lower body against Hodaka's clothes.

"Do you like this?" Hodaka asked and traced Toya's penis with his fingertips, building up such a fiery impatience inside Toya that he wanted to cry out.

"Nngh—mm!"

"Do you want more?"

Assaulted by Hodaka's questions, Toya nodded his head feverishly.

"Go—go inside."

Toya was desperate.

"Go all the way. Fill me up—!" Toya begged, drops of liquid pumping from his ripened body. "I want you to fill me—"

"How can I refuse?" Hodaka murmured.

Hodaka lifted Toya's legs, bending his body in half. Toya's knees were almost touching his chest, opening wide his disgusting cleft. He panted desperately, impatient for the man to violate him.

"Nngh!"

With a dull pressure, Hodaka was inside. As

Toya's endurance slipped away, he was frightened that Hodaka might not really love him. He found it easier to believe that when Hodaka treated him so roughly, it was to scorn him. But since Toya lusted for a connection to Hodaka's body, he couldn't avoid the torture. Even as Toya cursed his own obscenity, he accepted Hodaka into his body.

"Ah—angh!"

"You're squeezing me so hard. You must really like this." Hodaka's taunting voice pierced Toya's heart. But Toya still wanted more: a profound satisfaction at being filled, his entire body was ruled by Hodaka's penetration.



Chapter Seven

The café's air conditioner was on at full blast. The bell hanging over the door made a refreshing tingle every time a customer passed. Amano was right on time. He sat in front of Toya and gazed at him intently.

"How's the manuscript so far?" Amano asked.

"It looks perfect. I got sucked into the story, and I needed to know what was going to happen next, so I wound up finishing it in one sitting."

The day before, Amano had sent a print-out of his finished novel and Toya had quickly devoured it. There were a few places where he wanted Amano to make some changes, but he had no complaints about the overall product. The research they'd done in Nagano had brought the story to life. Toya had been sucked in even though he already knew the story.

"You really think so?!"

Toya had prepared himself for the possibility that Amano might say something about their indiscretions during the research trip, but it looked like Amano had no such intentions. On the contrary, he had lost none of his energy. Toya was relieved to see that Amano was the same as ever.

"There were a few parts I wanted to go over with you. But they're only minor details."

"Okay."

"First this part I marked—the monologue seems inconsistent with the parts around it."

"Oh, that. It's okay. In this part...hm. I was sure it was on this page."

Toya told him to speak up if there was anything he didn't want to change, but Amano didn't resist any of Toya's suggestions. Maybe Toya was just that convincing. In fact, several places that Toya pointed out to him for correction, Amano simply nodded.

"So how long do you estimate it will take to make these corrections? It would be great if you could finish within the month."

"It's going to take a little fiddling to make this monologue clearer, but I can get it to you by the end of the week."

"That fast?"

Toya had expected him to take a little more time. Amano's estimate was incredibly short. Seeing Toya's look of surprise, Amano grinned.

"I want to finish as soon as I can so that you can finally relax, Mister Sakurai."

"Thank you very much for your consideration. In that case, can you send it to me early next week? Say, Monday afternoon?"

Toya asked and Amano agreed, grinning broadly. It was Amano's first job with Sozan Publishing and only his second publication, which ought to be celebrated. Toya wanted to do everything he could to make sure the novel sold well. A review by someone famous on the cover would be great, if he could find someone to do it.

"Mister Sakurai?"

"Er, yes?"

Amano's quiet voice snapped Toya back from his reverie.

"I've been thinking about this for a while, but—when this project is finished, there's something I'd like to do."

"What's that?"

Maybe Amano wanted to serialize the story, or ask to do a new project. If sales got off to a good start right away, Amano might get a new contract, but Toya couldn't make any promises right away.

"I'd like to talk with you frankly, Mister Sakurai."

"Excuse me?"

"If you're with Kai Hodaka, that means you're open to being with guys. So I have a chance."

Toya stared wide-eyed at Amano's breeziness. Even if he could take a proposition like that seriously, what would it accomplish? Toya shook his head.

"I'd appreciate it if you would avoid making jokes of that kind during a business meeting. It's not very prudent."

"Do I sound like I'm joking?"

"If you were being serious, then I can only interpret it as an insult," Toya replied curtly. He didn't want any trouble. "I don't have any particular interest in men. I'm sorry if I've given you the wrong impression."

"Then all I need is for you to accidentally fall for some other man." Amano's voice was terribly forceful, implying that he wouldn't take "no" for an answer. "I know I'm not as good-looking as Kai Hodaka and

maybe I'm not as talented, but I don't think I'm a loser, either." Amano tilted his head and looked at Toya with a smile, but his eyes were earnest.

Toya didn't think a standard excuse was going to get him out of the situation. He had an idea, though. "Surely there are a lot of other people better suited to you than I am, Mister Amano."

"Well, I'm not going to force you into anything right now," Amano acknowledged without a hint of malice. "But when I first met you, I thought it would have been great to be with you. I don't know how to put it, but I really like how adorable you can be, even though you're an adult."

The word "adorable" rendered Toya speechless. Only Hodaka had ever said that to him before.

"I mean, I know you work hard and you're usually a pretty calm and collected professional. But sometimes you're completely unguarded. I really like that."

"You're not being fair, Mister Amano," Toya said with an ambiguous smile. "No matter what I say, you'll take it badly. And we were getting so much good work done."

"Then you don't have to answer right now."

Conceding to Amano's suggestion might stop him from hounding Toya for a little while. Unsure of what else to do, Toya considered Amano's suggestion, and then agreed. No matter what happened, he could never return Amano's feelings, and it would be cruel to encourage him. But if Toya flat out refused, it might affect the novel. Toya had to avoid any risk he could.

"Awesome!" Amano beamed, his hands balled

into enthusiastic fists.

"That means there's still hope for me, right?"

Toya didn't know how to respond to Amano's joyful question. He usually hated himself for being so wishy-washy. But in that moment, Toya was shocked to realize how duplicitous he was willing to be in order to avoid confrontation.

On the whiteboard that hung on one wall of the office, Toya wrote "Went home after meeting" below his name. He finished gathering his things and stood to leave.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Mister Makihara."

"Okay. Got a meeting today?"

"Yes, with Mister Hodaka."

"I *see*. That's tough. A regular march unto the breach. He's not making any outrageous demands of you, is he?"

Makihara sounded like he knew everything. Toya shook his head meekly.

"Everything's fine. I've finally gotten used to him."

"Hodaka's easier to deal with once he gets started on a project."

"That's...true. I had to make all sorts of extra demands this time, so that made it harder."

"Oh, did you ever decide on who you wanted to write the cover review for Amano's book?"

Toya was startled, but he only gave an ambiguous

smile, not allowing his reaction to show on the surface.

"Not yet."

"Could you ask Hodaka? I know he might be too busy to do it, though," Makihara asked him almost regretfully and Toya nodded, troubled.

Of course Toya had thought of doing that, but he figured that Hodaka didn't have a very positive attitude toward Amano. Toya hadn't felt inspired to test it out. But if he had to explain that to someone else, he might have to reveal his relationship with Hodaka. Just the thought of that kept Toya from saying anything.

"Well, it doesn't hurt to ask. See you tomorrow," Toya said.

Toya used to travel the road to Hodaka's apartment bursting with excitement. But since his last visit, his steps were heavy with listless emotions. Toya found it impossible to understand how things had come to be the way they were. He couldn't be satisfied with how he and Hodaka shared their feelings. He worried about his social standing and outside criticism. Was it wrong for him to have become a man of such insatiable desire? Was he paying for that? The more he thought about it, the less he understood. His thoughts were caged in.

Toya had visited Hodaka so often that he managed to cover the distance from work to Hodaka's apartment with barely a conscious thought. Toya took a deep breath and stared at the closed doors of the building's entrance. He had made an appointment with Hodaka, but when he recalled the coldness of the man's voice, it sent him into a mood so black that even he recognized he had hit rock bottom.

Toya had thrown himself into his work trying to forget about his problems with Hodaka. He had worked so hard that he had finished everything he could. Once Amano's proofreading was over, there would be nothing left to do.

Toya had even paid Takashima, the biggest headache of all his authors, so many gruesome visits, that he had finally managed to get a finished manuscript with relative ease. When he'd told Yoshikawa about it, he had looked at Toya in wonder and asked what kind of magic he'd used.

Toya had pressed the button for Hodaka's apartment and the maid answered, her voice crackling and artificial. Toya gave his name and business, and the door opened a fraction of a second later.

Toya's body seemed to tense with pain and anxiety as he thought back on the sex he'd had with Hodaka last time. Hodaka had never relented no matter how many times Toya sobbed, and every time Toya cried, he felt more pathetic. The worst had been when Hodaka shot his semen onto Toya's face. That was the first time something like that had ever happened to Toya.

Toya had noticed something terribly cold and cruel inside Hodaka. Something that saw other people as nothing more than cogs in a machine. Eventually the time would come when Hodaka would toss Toya aside as useless parts, something worthless that he didn't need.

Thinking that, Toya realized that no one could get inside Hodaka's heart. No ordinary person could break down the thick walls he'd constructed around himself.

When the elevator arrived at the fortieth floor,

Toya ran into a woman in the hallway. His face stiffened. It was the editor from Six Winds. She bowed politely to Toya and got into the elevator.

Toya's mood sunk. A dark feeling crushed his feelings into a tight ball and Toya bit into his lip, hard. She also wanted Hodaka's manuscript and had probably gone there to convince Hodaka to give it to her the same way Toya had. But Hodaka had told him that he only gave special treatment to Sozan Publishing and Toya had no choice but to believe that.

Toya was conducted through Hodaka's apartment into the living room, where he awaited the master of the house. He appeared serenely at the top of the spiral staircase.

"Thank you for taking the time to see me," Toya said.

Toya stood to thank Hodaka, but Hodaka only shrugged his shoulders dismissively while he said; "What do you want?"

"As I mentioned the other day, my company would like you to write something for us."

"Oh, that," Hodaka said, as if the matter was beneath his notice, and sat down across from Toya. Hodaka was as beautiful as ever. Just looking at him tore at Toya's heart. Every time Toya saw that man's face in his dreams, he suffered.

"Unfortunately, I'm tied up with a project for Six Winds at the moment. I need to give that priority for a while, so I won't be able to accept Sozan Publishing's request."

"What?" Toya was frozen with shock. Hodaka had

told him that he would give Toya's request priority.

"But Six Winds is releasing their list of new publications at the end of the month." Toya said. He doubted that the novel was already written. Which meant the earliest he could get anything from Hodaka would be in six months.

"It's my choice which project I write first."

"But—that isn't what you promised!"

"I don't remember any promise."

"But we played pool!"

The blood was rushing straight to Toya's head and he spoke more and more excitedly.

"But if you never win, I can never start writing, can I? In which case, I need to move on to other projects." Hodaka shrugged, the very image of cold dismissal.

"But you also said that you would only increase your pace of publication for my company!"

"And I did. If I had kept to my schedule, I would only be planning to write *Emergence* right now. But I pushed that forward and published it in March."

Hodaka's words sounded terribly arrogant, but if anyone were allowed to say these things, it was Hodaka. Because he was right. Maybe Toya was the one who was out of line for expecting special treatment twice.

"Then that means if the editor from another company offered to make a bet with you, you would accept?"

"Yes, if they wanted special treatment."

The implication that Toya was not the only one to receive special treatment made his heart ache. Especially since Hodaka never got carried away by his emotions.

That detachment was actually a blessing to Toya since he didn't want anyone to find out about his relationship with Hodaka. Was it just his own selfishness that made Hodaka's personality hurt him?

"If you still want me to write something for you first, we'll just continue the bet. I think that's more than special treatment for you."

Hodaka's words cut Toya's heart to shreds, just as intended. His body was, in the end, nothing but collateral in a bet. Did Toya's aching heart, which chased after Hodaka, have no value at all? Toya wished he were capable of cutting his heart out of his body. He wished he could surrender his body as a tool for his job. But it was impossible. Toya couldn't do it. Toya couldn't face everything with cold calculation the way Hodaka did.

"What are you going to do, Mister Sakurai?" Hodaka asked tauntingly.

Toya hung his head, his lips parting to speak. He berated his weakness. He was already on the verge of tears. Somehow he had to pull himself together and act professional in order to look Hodaka in the face.

Toya understood that it was essential to accept the bet in order to get his manuscript. But the words that wound up coming out of his mouth were not what he'd expected.

"I'm very sorry, but I must be going."

Hodaka turned his eyes on Toya in silence.

"I'll speak with you about giving our project preference another time. I apologize for taking so much of your time."

"All right."

"Thank you for meeting with me today."

Toya ground his teeth at his own pathetic display, making excuses and running away with his tail between his legs. But if he ran away, maybe Hodaka would come after him. Maybe he would notice the pain in Toya's heart. He couldn't let go of that last shred of hope.

Toya's footsteps dragged as he walked to the elevator, as if his shoes were made of lead. His pace was deliberately slow when he left the elevator on the ground floor, but there was no sign that Hodaka was coming after him.

What was I thinking?

Of course Hodaka wouldn't come. There was no way the man would chase after Toya. With the damage done, Toya regretted testing Hodaka. He should have been able to speak to him more calmly.

At that moment, Toya's cell phone began to vibrate in his jacket pocket. Toya hurried to get it out. What if it was Hodaka? If he tried to stop Toya, that would settle everything. These hopes raged through Toya as he looked at the phone's screen, but crumbled instantly to disappointment. It was Amano calling.

"Hello?" Restraining his fluttering heart, Toya hoped that he managed to sound as calm as he was trying to.

"Hello, Mister Sakurai? I'm sorry to bother you, but you weren't at the office."

"Is something wrong?"

"It's about the map for my draft. I tried faxing it, but some of the lines don't come out very well, and I don't have a scanner."

"Oh, I see." Toya spoke in a cheerful voice, trying to boost himself out of dejection. It seemed to calm Amano down.

"The publishers seem to be in a hurry, so I wanted to take it to the office, but I wasn't sure if the receptionist would still be there."

"In that case, I'll come pick it up. If you tell me the subway station nearest to you, I should be able to catch a taxi from there." Normally, it wasn't the sort of task that required a meeting, but Toya didn't want to be alone then, waiting for a phone call that would never come.

"Why don't I meet you somewhere, like Shibuya or Shinjuku? It's too much trouble for you to come all the way to me."

"That might be better, then. Do you have the time to spare?"

"It's no problem. I'm on my way back from work right now."

Just then, Toya suddenly remembered that the profile in Amano's novel said he enjoyed playing pool. If he went to the trouble of mentioning it, he must have liked it a lot.

"By the way, did I read somewhere that you enjoy playing pool? Or was that someone else?"

"Pool? Um, yeah, I play it pretty often. Why?"

"Would you mind teaching me how to play?"

"Huh?" Amano's voice came back dumbly. Toya found himself smiling at such an amusing reaction. He realized he was feeling much better already. Amano's voice had acted as a real boost for him.

"Sure, I don't mind, but I'm not sure I'm good

enough to teach anyone."

Toya couldn't consult with his superiors about whether or not to accept the bet with Hodaka for his manuscript. Clearly he had to accept it. If he took lessons from someone else, Toya knew that Hodaka would get upset with him. But Hodaka didn't trust Toya anyway, so what did it matter?

Maybe Toya was just getting desperate.

A little while later, Toya and Amano were supposed to meet at a café just in front of the ticket gates at Japan Rail's Shinjuku station. Toya was early, so he passed some of the time at a bookstore and when he got back to the station, Amano was standing there.

"Mister Amano!" Toya forced a smile and walked up to him quickly. Amano's eyes grew wide in surprise.

"What happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"You look like you're going to cry," Amano murmured, laying a hand gently on Toya's shoulder and drawing him against his body. Toya felt his cheeks flushing as he stood there, leaning against the chest of a younger man.

"You shouldn't let other people see you like that. Someone might take advantage of you."

"What?"

"Don't you realize how open you are?"

How pathetic—Toya had let the warmth of the boy's body relax him. The warmth of Amano's skin came vividly through the thin cotton of Toya's clothes. But the handsome young man, as friendly as could be, had given Toya something precious. It felt so good.

"Now I understand," Amano whispered in a painfully gentle voice as he patted Toya lightly on the back. The gesture was tender, as if he were consoling Toya.

"What?"

"You may look incredibly talented and professional, but really you're a delicate person. It's like you're made of glass."

Even at a time like that, Toya smiled ruefully at the florid exaggeration Amano used. But then he remembered that they were standing right in front of the station, exposed to the eyes of everyone in the crowd. Toya had begun by looking utterly vulnerable, but by then he was only embarrassed.

"Will you let me go now?"

"No, I'm sorry."

"Why—?"

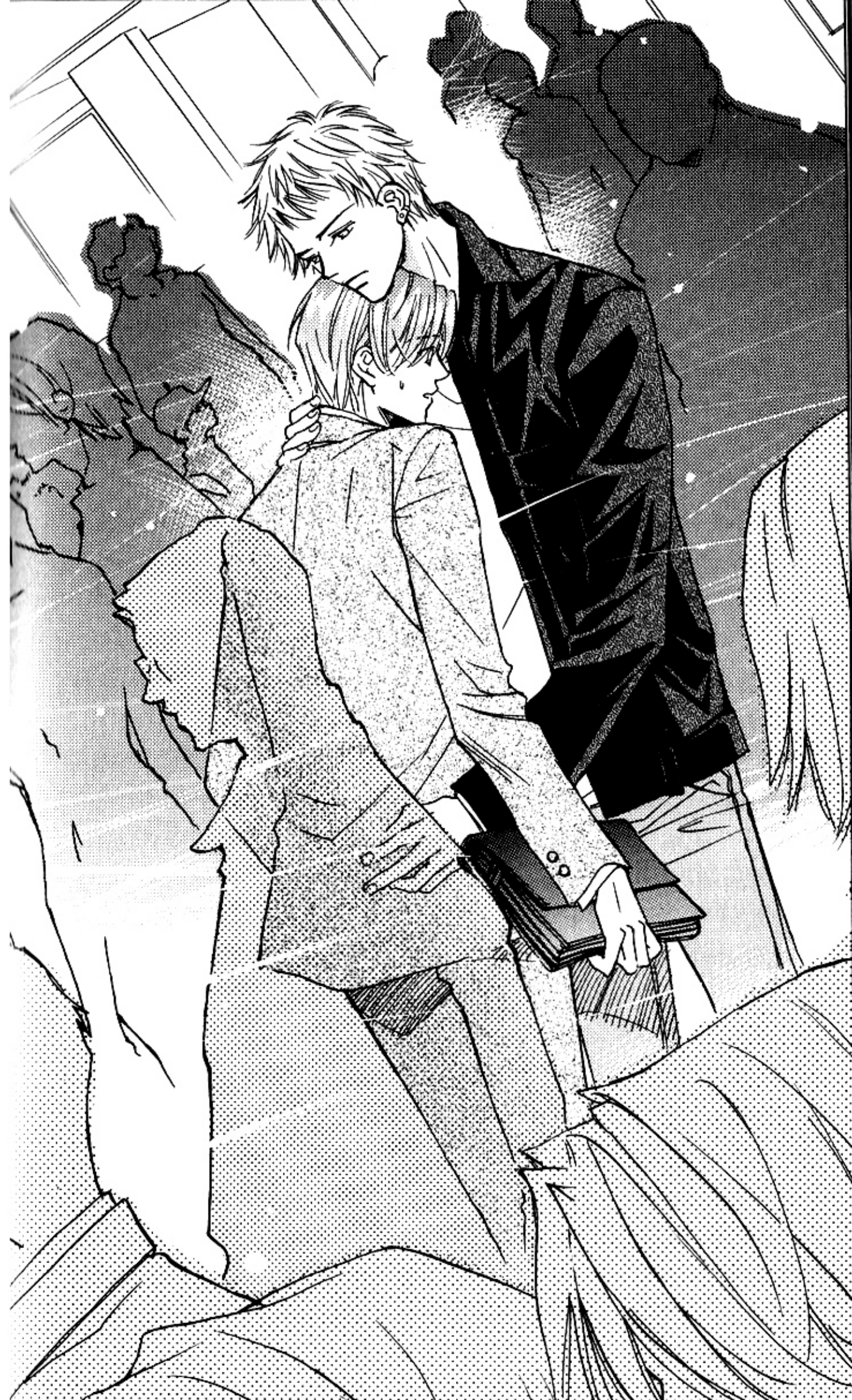
"It's too dangerous. If I let you go and see you looking so completely exposed again, I'm just going to love you even more."

The polite veil fell from Amano's words as he stripped away the blank face that was typical of his age.

When Toya was with Amano, he always acted strangely. Even though Toya never expected to fall for it, he always got sucked into Amano's way of doing things. Maybe it was Toya's destiny to be surrounded by people like Hodaka and Amano who had such attractive power.

"You always look so placid and mature. Why do you look so different today?"

Toya couldn't see the look Amano was referring to, but he was sure he looked pathetic to the man.



That was obvious.

“Really, please—let me go.”

“I’d like to stay like this a few seconds longer, but—oh well.”

At the exact moment that Toya pushed him away, Amano took a step back and so, Toya stumbled against Amano’s chest. The frivolous exchange made Toya sputter with laughter. Amano chuckled, too.

“You’re so cute.” Amano said and ruffled Toya’s hair. Powerless, Toya’s cheeks flushed.

“Please, stop teasing me like that,” Toya asked, but he felt like he was being rude, since he was the one who called Amano out that day.

“Let’s go,” Amano said, spinning around and starting to walk away. At the sudden loss of another human’s warmth, Toya felt a mysterious confusion.

“Ugh, there are so many people. It’s this way,” Amano said.

On a weekend evening, there were crowds of people everywhere in the city. Amano swept up Toya’s hand and began walking again, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“It’ll be easier to keep track of each other this way.”

“But you’re so tall, Mister Amano, you’re a walking landmark.”

“What’s wrong with doing it this way, though?”

Amano’s informal speech was a wonderful change for Toya. He felt like it had been ages since he’d received such warmth. Lately, Toya’s memories of being close to other people had been nasty, suffocating experiences. But

with Amano, he felt incredibly peaceful and restored.

Toya had already recognized what he was chasing after so urgently. He wanted kindness that flowed unconditionally to rejuvenate his crumbling body and heart. At some point, he had forgotten what it was to be healed.

On his way home, Toya stopped at a convenience store near the subway station to buy some alcohol. Once he was home, he took a shower and then sat on the edge of his bed to drink his beer. He’d drunk a little bit while playing pool with Amano, but at some point he’d stopped holding back. Being drunk was a rare event for him.

At first, Amano had been surprised at the dedication with which Toya played nine-ball, but he soon began teaching him earnestly. Maybe he had taken pity on Toya.

Amano improved Toya’s form and taught him tricks for estimating angles to hit the balls. Toya felt like he had improved a little bit. All he needed was some more practice to take away a win against Hodaka.

Normally, Toya would have poured the beer into a glass, but he couldn’t work up the energy for that. Drinking directly from the can, the chilly steel felt like it would freeze his lips. The beer was piercing cold in his mouth and bittersweet.

Lying back on his bed, Toya’s eyes began to sting. He curled into a ball, feeling a rush of emotions that threatened to break their bonds and overflow at

any moment. Being by himself only invited feelings of desolation.

Hodaka's caprice had started their relationship. That made it pretty amazing that they'd stayed together for more than six months. Toya was just an ordinary editor, but his lover was a popular author whose newest work had been greeted by the eager enthusiasm of thousands of people.

Toya couldn't just give up on Hodaka or his writing. He only wished that he could have chosen one of the two to love. Then he would have been able to focus on being either Hodaka's lover or his editor. But Toya didn't have any confidence anymore. It would be much easier if he could be demoted to an editor with benefits.

As that ridiculously self-pitying idea crossed Toya's mind, his cell phone suddenly began ringing. Toya reached out for it lethargically and saw Amano's name on the screen.

"Oh, Mister Sakurai? I'm really sorry. It's me, Amano."

"Thank you for your help today. Is something bothering you?"

"No. I mean, you just looked really sad when you left, so I was worried about you."

"I'm fine. I had a great time learning pool with you today."

"Are you upset because of Kai Hodaka?"

Amano penetrated straight to the heart of the matter and Toya didn't know what to say.

"No, it's—"

"I don't know if something happened, but you shouldn't be brooding all by yourself. You have to bounce your thoughts off someone else sometimes. And," the young man continued, "it's a lot better than doing nothing. It must be hard when your business and private life are all mixed up, but there are a lot of people waiting for Kai Hodaka's next masterpiece, so you have to keep trying. If you ever need someone to talk to, I'm here."

Warmth spread through Toya's heart. It was as if a fresh, warm breeze was blowing into his sealed up heart.

"Thank you for that, but...I'm fine."

Amano was right: Hodaka's readers were waiting. There were thousands of fans eagerly waiting to read more about the world that Hodaka had created. It was Toya's job to deliver a fantastic story to them.

He hung up the phone and sat up. He reached out to the bookshelf and took down Hodaka's *Emergence*. Toya had liked the story's climax so much and read it so many times that the book fell open to that page.

Toya vividly recalled his feelings when he first read the story.

Of course, he had told Hodaka how he felt on the same day, but that wasn't the only reason he remembered it. *Emergence* had marked a change in direction for Hodaka. Toya was proud to have created a story like that with the great writer.

Maybe he *should* try to tell Hodaka what was on his mind.

Toya wasn't usually the type to sit around waiting

for things to fall apart. He had to try to untangle the knotted threads of class, position, and self-criticism that lay between Hodaka and himself. If Toya didn't strip away all those affectations and face up to his own feelings, nothing would ever happen. He knew that in his heart.

But Hodaka had no intention of talking to Toya and Toya's resolve was too weak to force the issue, so he was always overwhelmed. He couldn't summon the courage to face Hodaka.

His heart was terrified of facing Hodaka, since the man had so often hurt him and forced him into submission. It was because Toya loved him that he was afraid of being hurt. He feared his suffering when Hodaka used him like a plaything.

Chapter Eight

Nearly everyone was at work that evening in the editorial department and it was hectic. Amano's project was proceeding smoothly. Toya had almost no corrections to make. Once the manuscript was compared to the proofreader's corrections, the work would be done except for the postscript and a profile.

Even though Toya knew it showed bad manners, he checked his e-mail while sipping coffee from a mug in his other hand. He had several messages, one of which was from Amano. The e-mail was surprisingly short given its file size. The rest of the message was attached in a document file containing the postscript. Double-clicking on the subject line of the e-mail, Toya's eyes leapt to the beginning of Amano's message.

After a standard greeting, Amano had jokingly added, "This concludes my work. I hope we can continue speaking frankly with each other," showing a glimpse of his true feelings.

It would not be an easy request to grant, though. Even then, Toya's heart was prisoner to Hodaka. He couldn't imagine belonging to anyone but him. Besides, Hodaka and Amano occupied different positions in his heart. They couldn't be compared.

If Amano *were* his lover, though, Toya wouldn't have to suffer so much. Amano seemed kind and

unusually selfless for his age. But most important of all was the lack of dark secrets, which made Amano's smile somehow healing.

Very soon after meeting Amano, the young man had become much more than a new author to Toya. But Amano could never be more important than Hodaka.

Toya had to give Amano a clear answer. When they spoke, Toya had to make up his mind and give Amano an acceptable answer. The more he thought about it, the more depressed he wound up feeling. But his relationship with Hodaka was only getting distressingly worse.

Toya's back was against the wall, but he had to laugh. He had challenged Hodaka to pool many times and continued to lose. Learning from Amano had only made the situation worse. Hodaka knew at once that he had been studying with someone other than Makihara and his anger flared up again. But some part of Toya had been expecting Hodaka to see through him. The fact that Toya hadn't cared at all was a sign of how desperate he had become.

"Hey Sakurai! Let's get some grub. I know you haven't eaten yet."

Yoshikawa leaned over from the desk next to Toya's, jolting Toya on purpose. His thoughts interrupted, Toya looked up. Makihara and the others were getting ready to leave. At that time of day, they'd be having either a late lunch or an early dinner.

"Sorry, I'm waiting for a phone call."

"Oh, okay. We'll send you some rations, then. You want a little sushi or a sandwich?"

"No, that's okay. I'm not very hungry."

Toya turned down the offer casually and Yoshikawa didn't pursue it. Toya didn't want his psychological stress to interfere with his work, and in fact, he was more composed than usual. He didn't mind doing overtime since he couldn't find any other way to spend his time except to throw himself into his work. But something else inside Toya was being exhausted. The more he thought about Amano or Hodaka, the more worn out he got.

"Hey again. Did you get your call?"

Looking up blearily, Toya saw Yoshikawa's head poking in through the office door. He had gotten back much sooner than Toya had expected. Toya glanced down at his watch and saw that they hadn't even been gone for fifteen minutes.

"Not yet. But that was fast."

"I changed my mind, so I just bought some takeout. I got some for you, too."

Toya didn't know what to say as Yoshikawa handed him a bowl of beef noodle soup with the words, "Your rations. The tea is self-serve."

"Thanks."

Toya really hadn't been hungry, but it would have been rude to ignore such kindness, so Toya thanked him with a smile. Yoshikawa's awkward kindness touched him. The reason Toya had adjusted so smoothly to his new department after being transferred a year ago was surely due to the people around him.

"I'll go make some tea, to make it up to you." Toya got up to make some green tea. When he got back, he saw that the lid was still on Yoshikawa's food: he had

been waiting for Toya to start eating. Toya sat back down at his desk and uncovered his food. The distinctive smell of boiled beef filled the room.

"You've seemed kind of down lately. Is something going on with Hodaka?"

"No, nothing like that. I'm just busy."

Snapping his chopsticks apart, Yoshikawa shrugged.

"You've got it pretty bad. They stuck you with a huge responsibility as soon as you got here. Mister Makiyara must really be laying down the pressure."

The pressure to crank out the next big success was the same at any publisher, or in any job. But that was just an excuse for Toya's weak spirit. He didn't always need to be so formal with everyone and put up a front. He wanted to relax sometimes and talk to people about his problems. He didn't think that was wrong.

"Yeah. If Mister Hodaka would just start writing, I wouldn't have to keep such a close eye on him, but until he does, I've got to keep working hard."

"I've heard he's got a really warped personality. Once his books are out, they sell like crazy, so there's not much you can do about it. Or maybe his love life is really busy."

Yoshikawa put emphasis on these last words, which bothered Toya. But he missed his chance to ask for the details when Yoshikawa heartily scooped the noodles of his soup into his mouth.

The powerful smell of the beef dampened Toya's already weak appetite and he took only hesitant bites from his bowl.

"He's surrounded by rumors about the women he's sleeping with, same as always. We'd all be better off if he'd get married and settle down. But he's not one of those guys writing books to make ends meet, so why should he change?"

"What do you mean he's surrounded by rumors?"

Toya felt a sharp pain in his chest, but he tried to maintain his cool exterior.

"Oh, that's right. You don't follow rumors like that." Yoshikawa ducked his head and lowered his voice, even though there was no one else there to overhear. "Remember how he was with that actress Mari Tanaka before? Not anymore. I hear he's dating an editor now."

Someone must have found out about Toya besides Amano. His heart started thudding in his chest, its vibrations reverberating in his eardrums. Had Amano told someone? Toya had trusted him when he said he wouldn't do anything to put Toya in an awkward position, but maybe he'd been too quick to trust.

Toya fought desperately to control his uneasiness as he waited to hear the rest, but Yoshikawa didn't notice any of it. He seemed to be having trouble chewing the huge mouthful of food he'd taken, and after a few moments of struggling, he gave up and took a big gulp of the hot tea.

"Anyway, maybe Hodaka would settle down if he had someone special." Yoshikawa shifted the topic drastically, so Toya asked, carefully guarding his calm, "Do you know which editor the rumors are about?"

"Well, since we're talking about women, we know it's not one of ours. His last editor here was Mister

Makihara and now he's with you. And neither of you seem like women to me," Yoshikawa laughed loudly.

Since Yoshikawa mentioned it, his idea that Hodaka would settle down once he got married made it obvious he couldn't be involved with a man. Which meant no one was gossiping about Toya. Toya had to smile at how upset he must have been to not think that far ahead.

But that means...

"Though there is Six Winds," Yoshikawa suggested. "They have a pretty cute woman working there. She's really good—been with them for three years. She's the editor in chief's favorite." Yoshikawa was strangely familiar with the details. He must have known someone at Six Winds.

"But that's not enough to start a rumor, is it?"

"You never know. But no one would let go of Kai Hodaka once they got hold of him. He's got looks, brains, money, everything. And they'd get pretty familiar working together, don't you think?"

Without ever noticing how sharply Yoshikawa's words were digging into the heart of the man sitting right in front of him, he rambled on enthusiastically.

"But seriously, if a guy like that would get married or start a business and get someone else besides an editor to deal with him, we'd have it a lot easier."

"Maybe so. But isn't it going kind of overboard to get married so suddenly?"

"What do you mean?"

"We can't suspect every male author in the world of marrying their editor every time it's a woman."

"Oh, but there's proof. And hey, you haven't eaten anything," Yoshikawa commented as he polished off the last bite of his food and wrapped it up with a gulp of tea.

"Yeah, I'm sorry."

Toya took one or two bites of the food apologetically. As the conversation continued, his appetite only decreased. But he still had to hear more.

"They've been spotted together at hotels and marriage halls."

"Marriage halls?" Toya's voice shook unintentionally. Was Hodaka getting married? He was the last man in the world Toya expected to get married—was he seriously considering it?

"That's right. He might just be doing it as some huge joke, but maybe the time has finally come for Kai Hodaka."

It was as if fate was punishing Toya for his crimes. In betraying his fiancée Miwa, he had taken on a burden of guilt he could never get rid of. So he was being punished.

"Oh, sorry. Is it still too early to talk to you about marriage?"

"No, it's not that. I'm fine."

Toya quickly pulled together a smile. He knew he wouldn't be able to eat any more and set his food back down on his desk. He'd only managed to eat a third of it. As he poked at what was left, his phone suddenly rang. Toya picked it up. It was an author he'd contacted about his proofs.

He could use that as an excuse to not eat the rest

of the soup. Relieved, Toya held up his hand to gesture at Yoshikawa that he was sorry. Yoshikawa apparently didn't mind and shot Toya a thumbs-up. He headed into the coffee room to throw out his dishes.

Toya's days passed in sleepless depression. If the fabled Kai Hodaka was thinking about marriage, the celebrity tabloids would probably be bursting with rumors about it. Toya scrupulously checked the tabloid ads posted inside the subway, which had never interested him before, but Hodaka's name never seemed to be there.

It was becoming common gossip among editors, so he would have expected the press to pick it up. But maybe Hodaka was serious about it and he'd issued a gag order on the press in order to protect the girl.

Toya just couldn't understand Hodaka's thinking. He'd said Toya was all he wanted and promised that he'd give Toya his heart.

Like a night sky obscured by heavy clouds, Toya couldn't see the light. He no longer had the confidence to shore his heart up as it crumbled. He was scared of the possibility that he could confess his feelings to Hodaka and be rejected. But suffering alone wouldn't accomplish anything. Toya had to put in some effort to rectify things in case it was just a misunderstanding. As Amano pointed out, if they got together and talked, things might get better. But if Toya ran, the situation would never improve.

Toya decided he would do it that night. He would talk to Hodaka and lay his heart bare.

When Toya got to the office, there were several sheets of faxed paper and some mail on his orderly desk. As he was going through them, his phone rang.

"Hello, pulp imprints division."

"Hello, this is Kurahashi. May I speak to Mister Sakurai?"

"Speaking. It's good to hear from you again, sir."

"I'm calling about the proofs."

Kurahashi was an author who had debuted with Sozan Publishing three years earlier. During that time, he had steadily solidified his position as one of the core authors of their division.

"How is it going? Are you almost finished?"

"Well, about that. I was planning to drop it off tomorrow, but there's been a death in my wife's family. We have to rush out there right away, so I'm not going to be able to bring it in."

"If it's done, I can send a bike messenger out to pick it up."

Kurahashi's mistrust of post offices was famous in the department. Ever since they had lost a copy of his proofs, he had been extremely cautious.

"That would be great."

"I need a few minutes to call and arrange one."

Their company had a contract with a bike messenger company, so they would work something out. Toya began the arrangements optimistically, but a problem came up: all the messengers were contracted until that night.

Toya thought about picking up the package himself. But as the thought flickered through his mind, he remembered that he'd resolved to go see Hodaka that night. He deliberated for a moment about what to do, and then called Kurahashi back. "I'm sorry to ask you this," he began politely, "but could you take it to a store near you and have them deliver it?"

Kurahashi was hesitant to agree at first, but given the situation he didn't have much choice. Finally, he backed down.

Toya could feel time flowing discouragingly slow that day. But still, focusing calmly on his work, the hour for visiting Hodaka arrived. Toya wrote "Went home: came at noon" on the office whiteboard, and then left the office.

What was he going to do? Obviously he couldn't blame Hodaka for everything. Breaking off his engagement and choosing his passion for Hodaka had been Toya's own doing. Toya recognized that even though Hodaka had made the first move, everything after that point had been Toya's decision. He could not escape the responsibility for that.

But was that what Toya had wanted? The more he considered it, the more his thoughts turned back on themselves—inescapable. He had to go forward. No matter how much time passed, their feelings would be opposites. Toya would always have a hard time understanding Hodaka's feelings and he would suffer for it.

Give me your heart. Talk to me. I want more than your body.

Toya loved Hodaka, so he wanted to understand him. He wanted to get to know him just a bit better. His wish was an honest one. But Toya wanted to laugh at how foolish he was being. He was so serious: all he could think about was how to keep hold of Hodaka's heart.

When had Hodaka's feelings shifted to that woman? Considering Hodaka's character, he would probably suggest that he and Toya continue being lovers even after the marriage. Just imagining that scenario depressed Toya.

Letting out a long breath, Toya walked out of Shinbashi station and stared at Hodaka's apartment building, only a few minutes' walk away. Every time he approached the tower, his heart pounded wildly.

At night, Hodaka would often be alone in the apartment doing work or lost in thought, having already sent the maid home. Sometimes he went out, but Hodaka lived his life on a schedule Toya couldn't quite figure out.

What if there was someone else at his apartment? Toya almost drew back at the thought, but if he scared himself, it wouldn't help anything. Ever since the moment he'd fallen in love with Hodaka, he'd been moving through a world of disillusionment. But he still loved Hodaka, loved his hopelessness, his loneliness. Toya wanted to wrap his love around all of it. Those feelings were still there, unvanquished.

He slipped through the front doors and pressed the intercom for Hodaka. Trembling, Toya waited for Hodaka's response.

“Yes?”

The robotic tone was different, but it was still Hodaka’s gorgeous voice.

“It’s Sakurai. I apologize for coming by so late, but I was hoping that you might have some time to talk,” Toya said, not mentioning his company’s name because he was going there privately.

Rather than answering, the door’s automatic lock opened. Toya had his fingerprint and voice print recorded to be able to open the door himself, but he thought a surprise visit would upset Hodaka.

He took the elevator to the fortieth floor. The ride seemed to last forever. When he was standing once more in front of Hodaka’s door, he rang the doorbell. After a few moments, Hodaka opened the door. He was dressed rather casually, probably winding down for the night.

“What is it? Do you need something?” he asked, standing in the doorway.

Toya was at a loss for words. “There’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“What is it?”

Toya trembled under the weight of Hodaka’s eyes, which seemed to be glaring at him. Weathering Hodaka’s cold gaze, everything Toya had planned to say vanished from his mind.

“Can you make it short?”

Hodaka implied that Toya had to talk there in the hallway, so Toya had no choice but to begin. That was the only path left to him.

“I love you, sir.”

Hodaka didn’t answer.

Toya saw an earnest confession of his feelings as the last card he had to play. If he asked about the woman from Six Winds, it would only have been rehashing an unpleasant topic and then Toya would have no choice but to meekly pour his heart out.

“I don’t know how you feel, sir, but...you’re the only one for me. I’ve never loved anyone but you.”

“And?”

“That’s all.”

That was all Toya had left. He could do nothing more than love Hodaka. His heart ached at his pathetic lack of strength. He wasn’t like Hodaka. His heart was only enflamed by Hodaka, his excitement was for him alone. The only thing Toya could offer was his love.

But to a man like Hodaka who had everything, that love had no meaning. Hodaka wouldn’t care whether Toya had some advantage like that or not.

“I don’t understand what you’re getting at,” Hodaka murmured, reaching a hand out to Toya. Toya flinched as his body retreated instinctively from the man’s touch. Hodaka’s eyebrows knit together doubtfully for a moment and his hand dropped.

“It’s not something that needs to be figured out,” Toya said. How could he explain it? How could he make Hodaka understand? They were speaking the same language, but there was a huge gulf between them.

“How can you not understand what I mean when I tell you that I love you?” Toya asked, his voice strained.

“Every person feels emotions differently. There’s no reason our thought processes should be the same.”

"You're just overanalyzing this," Toya interrupted, an unprecedented move. "I'm tired of it. I'm not like you, sir. I can't make a clean break between my work and personal life. My feelings won't allow me to take the bet with you."

"Then I'll satisfy you on private time today. You're not happy, are you? I'll take good care of you."

Toya knew Hodaka was talking about sex and he got even more disheartened. That wasn't why he'd gone there. Even if they came together physically, it wouldn't satisfy all of his needs. He would be happy to feel the body heat of the man he loved, but there were times when that wasn't enough. If there was no feeling behind it, it was meaningless. But Hodaka wanted nothing from Toya but his body.

"That's not what I meant!" Toya's words grew harsh. He glared back at Hodaka. "The reason I don't want to be physical is *because* I love you! The physical stuff confuses everything. Our feelings are the most important thing. Aren't they?"

Could his love for Hodaka ever be anything but synonymous with sex? Even when he loved him so much? Even when he yearned for Hodaka from the very bottom of his heart?

"What I want is your feelings. Your heart."

If Toya couldn't have that, if Hodaka couldn't even love him in secret, he wouldn't be able to love Hodaka, either.

"But I told you I'd give you my heart. That's not enough for you?" Hodaka's arrogant voice beat against Toya's eardrums.

"It doesn't show."

There was still the problem of that woman. Even Toya wasn't stupid enough to believe Hodaka's empty arguments.

"If you don't believe the things I tell you, there's not much I can do about that."

I've finally been tossed aside.

Hodaka had all but said that it was the end.

"But—"

What did Hodaka want him to believe? He had never said he wanted to see Toya and he had never made any time for them to share their feelings. Hodaka was just playing with Toya.

How was Toya supposed to trust a person like that? Maybe Hodaka had never lied to Toya. But that didn't count for much. If he stayed silent about the truth, it was just as bad. Even the most dishonest person in the world didn't have to lie. Even they could keep their word.

"But I—" Toya stuttered, wanting to express how he felt. He didn't believe that his words would unlock Hodaka's heart to him. Hodaka was a harsh, detached logician. Confronting him with raw emotions was not the best tactic. Even then Hodaka was staring at Toya with an extremely dissatisfied expression. Toya was the only one getting worked up.

"You're right," Toya murmured under his breath, then gave a little laugh. What else could he do? He was acting like an idiot. That was Hodaka. Didn't he realize that?

Toya could never have a serious relationship with

a man like him. He was a total idiot. His months of turmoil had just ended in disappointment. Toya had to end it all—immediately.

“I’m sorry for bothering you,” Toya said simply, bowing politely. He opened the door to Hodaka’s apartment with trembling fingers, and then closed it behind him. Hodaka wouldn’t come after him. Toya knew that. So he didn’t turn around.

Even when Toya thought that it was all over, the end of the world refused to come. He thought dawn would never come again; but it did. Even in his despondent, nihilistic frame of mind, Toya didn’t forget to breathe.

The next day, the weather was fair, betraying Toya’s emotional state. The air conditioner at the office was turned on high and Toya could feel a chill on his skin.

“Is this everything for the deliveries today, Mister Fujiwara?”

The deliveries and mail that had arrived that day were distributed to each person’s desk, but the most important delivery wasn’t at Toya’s desk. Maybe it had accidentally been given to someone else.

“That’s everything that’s come so far. Do you want me to check again?”

“Yes, if you don’t mind.”

Kurahashi’s corrected proofs should have come, but he didn’t see anything like that among his deliveries.

“I don’t see anything special.”

“That’s odd.”

The envelope would have been pretty big. Toya didn’t think it could get lost that easily. Maybe it had been misplaced.

Unfortunately, Kurahashi had already left and Toya didn’t know how to get in touch with him. He tried calling Kurahashi’s cell phone, but he must have had it turned off because Toya couldn’t get ahold of him.

“Something the matter?” Makihara asked.

Toya shrugged. “Mister Kurahashi’s proof corrections haven’t arrived yet.”

Instead, the department had received a faxed copy of the shipping receipt for his proofs. Toya tried entering the shipping number into the tracking service of the delivery company, but it returned no matching numbers. It was still early, so it was also possible that it hadn’t been recorded yet, but Toya was having some doubts. What if the proofs had been lost? Though Toya didn’t want to jinx it, the thought crossed his mind.

“Depending on the company and when the package gets sent, it can take a day or two to get here. Why not wait until tomorrow to see?”

“You’re right.”

Some part of Toya remained unconvinced, but since he couldn’t do much work on an undelivered project, he had to let it go. If he’d known that it would happen like that, he would have gotten an emergency contact number for Kurahashi. That much should have been common sense.

Toya had been thinking so much about Hodaka

that he had let his diligence slide on an important project. That was why even Hodaka had turned his back on Toya. The thought of his own ineptitude depressed Toya all over again.

Toya's worries proved well founded.

"The author's proofs still aren't here?" Makihara asked.

"No. They're looking into it, but they might actually be lost." Toya bit his lip after answering Makihara's question.

Even after three days, Kurahashi's proofs hadn't arrived. The number on the receipt still didn't work and searching on the web didn't help either. Toya had just called the store's headquarters and asked them to look into it.

"Any contact from Kurahashi?"

"I haven't been able to reach him. There was a death in the family that took him out of town and he's still not back."

"Man. Those country funerals can take forever."

Toya's stomach tingled painfully with a terrible premonition. Kurahashi had been ahead of schedule, but if it took much longer to track down the package, they would have to push his release date back. Toya wanted to avoid doing that since Kurahashi hadn't done anything wrong.

Once a day, Toya left a message on Kurahashi's answering machine that he wanted to get in touch as soon

as possible to update him on the situation, but he never got a reply. In short, his back was against the wall.

"I'm sorry."

"This is going to make Kurahashi hate delivery companies even more." Makihara's voice was joking, but it struck home. Toya simply stood there dejectedly.

"I should have gone to pick it up. All the bike messengers were out then."

"It's not your fault."

Despite the kind tone, Makihara's words cut into Toya's heart. It was Toya's fault. He didn't need anyone to tell him that to know it was true.

"I'll try looking for it again." Leaving Makihara's desk, Toya returned to his seat and stared at the receipt Kurahashi had faxed him.

The recipient address at Sozan Publishing was right and Kurahashi's home address was right. The contents were declared as a manuscript and the handler's address was the name of a major convenience store chain.

"The Park Street store, huh?" Toya murmured, looking up the store's phone number in a telephone book.

Of course Toya doubted that anyone would remember Kurahashi dropping off the envelope. He didn't even know when Kurahashi had sent it. But he wanted to get a lead on the missing manuscript, so he called the number and explained the situation to the person who picked up. The answer Toya got was blunt.

"Sorry, I don't know anything about it," the young man said with a lazy mumble.

"Is there anyone who was on duty at the time?"

"Huh?"

Behind his distracted voice, Toya heard other employees saying, "Welcome" or "Thank you." Apparently he'd caught them at a busy time.

"I'd have to look that up. But we're real busy right now. Can you wait 'til my manager gets here?"

"I'm sorry. I'll call back later." Toya hung up and then leaned back in his chair, stretching his arms. "Dang it."

Toya was at an impasse. The delivery company must have lost it after all. But the problem couldn't be resolved with monetary compensation. They had lost a proofed manuscript full of the author's corrections. It would be easy enough to get the original file from the printers, but Kurahashi had a sensitive nature and it would take time for him to make the same corrections over again. And it wasn't just one or two pages: it was four hundred pages he would have to correct. It wouldn't be easy to ask Kurahashi to do it all over again.

It was Toya's fault. No matter how he looked at it, he was responsible. He knew Kurahashi hated using big delivery companies. Once Toya had found out he wouldn't be able to send a bike messenger, he hadn't gone to pick the package up himself. He'd just assumed it wouldn't get lost.

Hodaka had distracted him and he'd neglected his job. There was no getting around it. That night, Toya had put Hodaka above his work, and he had to answer for that mistake. First Toya had lost Hodaka, and then he lost confidence in his ability to do his job.

"Sakurai! Phone call for you from Mister Kurahashi!"

Toya picked up his phone. "This is Sakurai."

Kurahashi's annoyed voice reached his ears. "Hi, this is Kurahashi. I got your messages."

"I have to offer you my most sincere apologies."

"All right. But you said you needed to explain something to me?" Kurahashi's voice was sharp and combative. Pain lanced through Toya's stomach.

"I've called both the delivery company and the convenience store you used to send the manuscript, and they're in the process of tracking it down."

"This is why I didn't want to mail it."

Kurahashi's words prickled with venom. His accusatory tone made Toya's stomach hurt even more. Toya had been an editor for nearly five years and, whether through good luck or bad, it was the first time he'd had a problem like that.

"I'm really very sorry. I should have come to pick it up."

"So what are we going to do? This is going to bring us right down to the wire for the release date."

"I'm looking into the problem right now. In the meantime, I've had the printing office make a new copy for you. I'm going to send that out to you, with my most sincere apologies."

Kurahashi sighed audibly. "Even when it gets here, it's going to be tough. But just send it. I'm too tired to even look at another set of proofs today. It should get here tomorrow morning if you mail it."

"Then I'll send it by bike messenger."

Kurahashi wasn't really blaming Toya after all, but there was no mistaking the fact that Toya had put him in a bad mood. Even if Kurahashi rushed and did the corrections over as fast as he could, there was no telling if they could stick to the original schedule. Toya was no longer sure how much of it was his fault and how much was forgivable.

"Ugh," Toya groaned, exhausted. Lately all he'd been doing was hovering at his desk, waiting for any sign of the arrival of Kurahashi's package, which never came. Of course he realized he was in the wrong, but he still wanted to complain. He just wished he could share his feelings with someone, someone like Hodaka. But that was stupid; it was over between them. Hodaka hadn't come after him.

Toya's occasional desire to be indulged by Hodaka was just his own selfishness. Obviously, he had lost sight of his pride as an adult. He should have treated it more flirtatiously and called it the selfishness appropriate to a younger man. Their relationship had ended while he was still incapable of doing that.

"Mister Sakurai! Call for you from the delivery company!"

"What?" Toya's head jerked up in surprise as Yoshimi called out to him.

Chapter Nine

A sign at the entrance of the hotel announced the Mizuno Publishers' Annual Mystery Writers Award Ceremony, with a party honoring the winners to follow. The hotel in Hibiya was one of a handful of gigantic hotels in the country, and its largest ballroom was particularly famous. Many people passed through each day.

Toya remembered hearing that Hodaka was going to put in an appearance at the party. He thought he had laid the affair to rest long ago, but a flame still smoldered inside, nearly impossible to extinguish. He finally understood what it meant to carry a torch for someone.

In the end, Kurahashi's package had been found at the delivery company's Kyoto office. It wasn't clear where the mistake occurred, but they told Toya someone had misread Tokyo as Kyoto. Toya thought it was a flimsy excuse, but since the proofs had arrived the next day, they'd been able to begin finalizing them without any more problems.

Kurahashi had apologized for speaking so angrily to Toya; he'd said he was worn out from the funeral. But Kurahashi hadn't been at fault, so getting an apology from him only made Toya feel worse.

Once Toya had returned to a normal routine after

going through so much chaos, he realized how empty his heart was. He had celebrated every day of his life when he was Hodaka's lover. No matter how stressful work got, the thought of seeing Hodaka had been enough to make his day.

Thinking about Hodaka wasn't going to help anything. Toya was going to go see Amano that day. He had to forget about Hodaka and pull himself together.

Amano had finished his first book with Sozan Novels, so Toya was going to see him on the pretext of giving him review copies of the book. But Toya also had to give Amano the answer he'd been anticipating for so long.

Toya had to cheer up or else he would only hurt the poor boy.

Toya had hesitated before rejecting Amano because of his relationship with Hodaka. But with everything over, Toya didn't care if his relationship with Hodaka was exposed or not, so he thought it would be a simple matter to tell Amano they couldn't be together.

Amano was meeting a friend at the party, but he'd invited Toya to an Italian restaurant inside the hotel afterwards. A mid-level restaurant like that would fall under his company expenses, so Toya didn't have any objections. At the appointed time, Toya headed for the restaurant.

"Hello, sir," a waitress said as Toya walked into the restaurant.

She seated Toya in the non-smoking section at a two person table that looked out on the street. Amano was not there yet, so Toya glanced over the menu before

ordering an iced coffee. He turned his gaze casually out to the street, and his face tensed immediately. He saw Hodaka and—that was the third time with the woman, there was no mistaking it. Hodaka was with his editor from Six Winds. They were dressed casually, so there was no way to tell whether they were on the job or off. All Toya could be sure of was that they shared a rich familiarity.

If Hodaka looked his way, Toya would be seen. He hoped to escape their notice in his awkward situation. He bent over his table, as if praying, and Hodaka passed the lounge with a placid expression. Toya was relieved. But that very same moment, a terrible chill filled his heart. Hodaka hadn't even noticed him. The man who Toya had loved so much hadn't even registered his existence.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Toya heard a chipper voice overhead, in stark contrast to the returning calm of his heart. Looking up, he saw Amano.

"I just got here myself." Toya forced a smile onto his face.

"I just saw Kai Hodaka. He had a brochure from a wedding parlor—are you two getting married?"

As Toya searched for an answer to that thoughtless joke, Hodaka came into the lounge, still in the woman's company. Toya had no idea where to look. With the worst possible luck, his eyes met Hodaka's. The man recognized Toya and walked up to him boldly.

"It's been a while, hasn't it?" Hodaka smiled as if nothing had happened.

"It's good to see you again, sir."

Toya was forced to stand up and bow to Hodaka and the woman. As if pulled along behind him, Amano stood and paid his respects to Hodaka as well.

"Are you two going to the party?"

"No," Toya cut in. He pushed away the momentary hesitation that sprung up and continued, "This is a private matter."

"Oh, then I apologize for interrupting," Hodaka said, twisting his mouth into a slight smile before following his waitress to another table.

I lied.

Toya had only done it because Hodaka had insisted that he not see Amano on his own time. Toya had wanted to get a reaction out of Hodaka.

It was a calculating, hateful lie.

But Hodaka had let it roll over him like nothing, and that plunged a dagger deep into Toya's heart. He watched Hodaka begin chatting with the woman after they were seated. The sight rocked Toya's heart deeply.

I hate this. I really hate this.

Toya didn't want to forgive Hodaka. No matter how the man justified it, Toya didn't want anybody but himself close to Hodaka. Toya didn't care how petty it was; he wanted to be the only one standing at Hodaka's side.

Toya was struck by an impulse to run over to where Hodaka was sitting, fiery jealousy smoldering beneath the surface. Maybe Toya had always had such violent emotions within him. Maybe that profound sensitivity had always lain dormant within him. Toya squeezed his hands into tight fists, so terrified of his intense emotions

that he shrunk back.

"Mister Sakurai? Are you okay?"

"Oh—excuse me."

When Amano called his name, Toya fell back into his seat and turned a smile on the young man across from him. Though his cheeks were taut, he managed to smile. That day had to be the day that he gave Amano an answer. He couldn't afford to hesitate. If he accepted Amano's offer, he would be going back to his dishonesty, to the ugly part of him that had tossed Miwa aside.

But he couldn't go back to Hodaka, either.

If Toya was any more dishonest, he would end up hurting someone. He didn't want that. He didn't want to hate himself any more. He'd spent more than enough time being mired in those terrible feelings.

Perhaps out of consideration for the fact that Toya had trouble holding his alcohol, Amano selected a white wine, which had a crisp and refreshing taste.

"I've wanted to try this restaurant since I never get to eat at hotels," Amano said as he looked at Toya with a cheerful smile. Toya returned a more ambiguous smile.

Toya wasn't really in the mood for dinner, but it was a celebration of Amano's book being finished. He had no excuse to be sulky. So he gave it his best effort, struggling to produce a smile.

To make up for Toya's lack of enthusiasm, Amano told one interesting story after another. Just seeing the trouble Amano was putting himself through to cheer

Toya up made Toya feel even worse. He let out a breath of relief when they managed to reach the dessert without incident. Toya had a bowl of sherbet and Amano ordered grilled apple slices.

"Sorry to make you come see me. Did I wear you out?" Amano asked.

"No, don't worry about it! I'm glad I got to see you."

"I'm happy to hear that." Amano's gentle tones trembled gently against Toya's eardrums. His voice, completely unlike Hodaka's, began tugging delicately at Toya's heartstrings.

"I don't need you to be my boyfriend, so please—stay," Amano said suddenly, his voice dropping.

Confronted with his unexpectedly serious expression, Toya was at a loss for words. "What are you—?"

"Maybe you'll be able to forget everything, all the bad things, if I wear you out completely."

Toya's eyes widened when he realized Amano was talking about sex.

"I can't ask you to like me or be my boyfriend. But I just can't stand to see you looking so sad, Mister Sakurai."

How nice it would be if Toya could drown himself in pleasure and forget everything else in the world. Toya wanted to pretend that everything with Hodaka had never happened.

"I'll be nice with you. You'll be able to forget everything," Amano said and took Toya's delicate fingers in his hands. Toya couldn't shake off Amano's

touch, even though he didn't want to give Amano any false hopes.

"I told you I would never be petty. I won't tell anyone about Kai Hodaka and I won't do anything to hold you hostage."

Being treated so kindly confused Toya. His brittle heart crumbled like dust. Toya felt as if he might accept all of Amano's tenderness.

"I reserved a room. Please come with me."

Was the young man the only person Toya could depend on? Unable to reveal his weakness to his friends or coworkers, Toya had little choice but to suffer alone. But maybe Amano could save him from that.

"There's someone I like," Toya said.

"I know. But your love will fade someday. I'm not a child; I don't believe in love lasting forever."

Amano's sudden declaration shook Toya. He squinted dubiously at the young man's face.

"No matter how much you love a person, some day it'll end. Undying love doesn't exist. No one could blame you if your love doesn't last forever or if you fall in love with someone else. There's no reason you should be trapped by that immoral man, Mister Sakurai."

Amano was right. Immortal love didn't exist; there was no love that remained unchanged for eternity. Toya knew that firsthand, since he had tossed aside his fiancée Miwa for Hodaka.

Toya, who had injured others, was hardly an innocent. People always betrayed each other, always lied. Hodaka had said that. As the words resurfaced in Toya's mind, he found it hard to breathe.

"You're wrong. I can only do that with a person I love," Toya said.

"Me, too. But I think if we sleep together, you might be able to relax. I don't mind if you use me for that."

Amano's offer was sincere and heartfelt.

"I'm sorry, but I don't know what to say." Toya couldn't deal with it anymore. He paid the bill and then stood up to go to the bathroom. His reflection in a long polished mirror wore a weary expression, twisted with suffering. Toya took several deep breaths, his fingers fluttering over his heart. He pressed his hand there, through the cloth of his jacket. The gentle rhythm reassured him that, despite his despair, he was still alive and that he would have to go on living without Hodaka.

If he slept with Amano, it might make things easier. Maybe he could forget about his feelings for Hodaka. Toya was surprised at how deeply moved he was. He couldn't leave Amano alone for too long, so he went back to the table.

"We have to go soon, Mister Amano."

"Oh, you're right. Let's get going." The perceptive young man stood up, bowing his head to Toya. "Thanks for covering the bill."

It was quiet outside the restaurant. There was no one around. The smartest thing to do would have been to go their separate ways.

"My room is on the twentieth floor. I think the elevator is in the main wing of the building," Amano said, being remarkably persistent.

"Mister Amano, I-I'm not sure I—"

Amano bent down slightly to whisper softly in Toya's ear. "How can I leave you alone? You're too sexy."

Toya shivered. Hodaka's memory obstructed his vision. He remembered the times that Hodaka had slept with him, and the memories were painful. He remembered the way it felt when the man penetrated deep into his body.

"If things aren't going well between you and Kai Hodaka, you need someone to comfort you. You seem sincere, Mister Sakurai, but I don't think you can manage it on your own."

Toya's cheeks burned. He wanted to look away, anywhere else, but he just couldn't tear his gaze away from Amano. Toya panted shallowly in confusion.

Amano clasped his hands. "If you don't turn me down, I'm going to force you to come with me."

Amano's affectionate gaze washed over Toya. Toya's hesitation was on the brink of disappearing. The strongest influence on Toya was the fact that it had been three weeks since Hodaka had last touched him. Toya was reaching his limit. What would it be like to sleep with Amano? Toya found himself imagining it.

Just then, a beautiful, familiar voice struck Toya's ears.

"If you've finished your work, how about you let him go?"

Toya turned around in disbelief to see Hodaka standing there.

"Mister Hodaka," Toya said in a daze.

Amano stood stock still, staring at Hodaka, and

then he suddenly pulled Toya closer. Unable to react, Toya stayed pressed against Amano's chest. His mind was a complete blank, wondering what Hodaka was doing there.

"I still have some business with Mister Sakurai. I'd appreciate it if you stayed out of it," Amano retorted defiantly, his eyes locked with Hodaka's.

"Looks to me like you two have finished your business. I only let you have him for that."

"Mister Sakurai already told you that our business tonight was private."

Amano sounded mad as he challenged Hodaka.

"He owes me the first claim on his private time," Hodaka said, and if it has been anyone else to say something so arrogant, Toya would have been shocked. But when Hodaka spoke that way, it rendered Toya speechless.

"Come, Toya."

Seeing Hodaka right before him, Toya's body seemed to move reflexively.

Amano held Toya back tightly. His arm was surprisingly strong and Toya was held fast.

"Don't go with him," Amano whispered against his ear. "If you do, he'll just hurt you again. You must realize that."

But—how could that be?

When Toya saw the Hodaka's face and heard his voice, his heart ached. It was because he still loved Hodaka deeply. He couldn't erase his love for the man. No matter how it hurt him or how much he suffered, Toya loved Hodaka. More than anyone. He could never



leave him. It was impossible to try and explain that rationally.

“I’m sorry,” Toya murmured as he gently pushed Amano away and walked back to Hodaka.

Chapter Ten

Every time Toya moved his sweaty body, the vinyl seat cover squeaked. They were in the taxi less than ten minutes, but Hodaka had been tormenting Toya in the backseat, after first making sure that the driver couldn’t see him.

Hodaka dragged his fingers lightly over Toya’s knee and Toya’s oversensitive body reacted beautifully. But Toya fought back desperately, refusing to let out a perverted cry in public.

“Did you have too much to drink? You have to watch out for that,” the driver said, oblivious to the situation.

“You may be right,” Hodaka answered.

Toya looked at Hodaka, tears brimming in his eyes, but the man didn’t care. Hodaka inched his hand up from Toya’s knee to his thigh. Toya gulped again at the movement of those fingers, but Hodaka never touched his arousal, which had begun to grow warm with anticipation. Instead, his hand returned to Toya’s knee.

The taxi finally stopped in the basement garage and Toya followed Hodaka out of the car. How had that happened? Why had Hodaka been there? Toya’s doubts were answered by what Hodaka did next. He took Toya up to his apartment and led him directly to the bathroom.

Hodaka shoved him, still in his suit, onto the tiles.

“Wait!”

Toya couldn't stop him. Lukewarm water rained down over his head. Hodaka ruthlessly forced him to take a shower, his hand resting on the faucet.

“What are you—?”

In an instant, Toya felt the blood rising to his head in anger.

“Get the smell of that other man off of your skin,” Hodaka said. His words were incredibly detached, but his actions were utterly impassioned. “I want you to throw away any clothes that might have touched him. Take them off.”

“If you don't even love me, just leave me alone!”

Hodaka had already mistreated Toya with his petty behavior in the taxi, and then he was doing something worse. Toya screamed at him, letting his emotions control him as his voice echoed strangely in the bathroom. “If all you want is to play with my body, can't you just forget me?”

“Who told you that?” Hodaka sounded almost surprised. When Toya heard that, he felt as if he were at the bottom of a pit of misery.

“I've heard enough. I'm tired.” Toya hung his head limply, sitting on the tile floor.

“That's why I don't want you to dally with other men. Did I ignore what you need that much?”

“You and I have no relationship, sir! Why do you care if I do something with anyone else?”

“You belong to me. It looked like you'd forgotten that, so I went to bring you back.”

Toya sensed not the slightest uncertainty in Hodaka's arrogant words.

“I'm tired of hearing that. I hate being treated like an object. I hate how violent you are. I'm not a toy. I have a heart. How can I be with you when I know you love someone else?”

Hodaka stood beside Toya, looking down at him. He shrugged.

“I don't recall being interested in anyone but you. And I'm not about to hand you over to someone else.”

“Despite the fact that you don't even love me?”

“I do love you,” Hodaka replied calmly.

Toya was sure Hodaka had given that simplistic answer knowing it would disturb him. “Stop jerking me around! You don't act like you love me!”

If Hodaka loved him, why did he always make Toya suffer? Why did he always hurt him? Why didn't he trust Toya, who needed nothing but Hodaka?

“How can I answer that? I'm sorry, but you can't expect me to know how you want to be loved. All I can do is what I know.”

How could Hodaka not know, when he created such detailed, harshly insightful, and detached psychological descriptions?

Hodaka kneeled down and kissed Toya, so violently that Toya couldn't breathe. It was almost a bite that made Toya grunt weakly.

“If you explain it to me, I'll learn. Just tell me what you want,” Hodaka whispered into Toya's ear. It lingered sweetly, making his whole body tremble. “I'll give you whatever you want.”

Hodaka's voice intoxicated Toya. That day alone, the mighty tyrant bowed before Toya to serve him. Maybe he could ask, just one more time.

"You're not lying to me...are you?"

"I'm never going to betray you. I have no interest in lying."

"Do you...love me?"

"Didn't I just say so?" Hodaka pressed a feather-soft kiss against Toya's eyelids.

"Are you—?"

"I told you, I don't lie. I love you, Toya."

The shocking beauty of Hodaka's voice tickled Toya's ears, echoing sweetly.

"Then can you tell me that you adore me?"

Toya doubted Hodaka could. If Hodaka didn't adore him, he would never say he did, because that would be a lie. The thought of it made the tears flood from Toya's eyes. Did Hodaka understand why? He might not have even noticed, since the shower was still pounding down over Toya's head.

"I adore you," Hodaka said and nibbled on Toya's ear, devouring him. Toya clung to the man's neck, a sob escaping him. Gradually, spreading like a sweet poison, Hodaka's proffered confession seeped into Toya's heart.

"I love you, too, sir. I love you so much. That's why I couldn't understand," Toya said, clumsily confessing as much of his love as he was capable of expressing. "I could never love anyone but you, sir. I don't need anyone but you. But I was worried. So, so worried."

Toya wanted Hodaka badly. He wanted to be

connected to him. He wanted to be bound by his desire. But it wasn't good enough if Hodaka couldn't understand that their hearts were involved as well.

"Please tell me that you love me sometimes," Toya begged.

Hodaka was getting wet as he swept aside the hair that stuck to Toya's forehead and pressed a kiss against the skin. "I told you I love you. Isn't that enough?"

"I need to hear it more than once."

Clinging to Hodaka, Toya buried his face against Hodaka's chest. Hodaka's wet shirt clung to his cheek.

"Is that what this was all about? You should have said something sooner."

"But I was always scared to make sure. I was the only one acting like I was in love."

Thinking that it would all be over soon, Toya could be as docile as he needed to be. Hodaka must have thought Toya was an idiot for acting that way. He must have been astounded.

"Where's your proof?" Hodaka asked.

"I always wanted to see you, but you never wanted to see me."

"You thought—" Hodaka's words came out in a soft sigh. "Do you think I have time to stay at home every day?"

"Huh?"

"You're too busy to take vacations. I was trying to be considerate."

Considerate? Toya couldn't imagine that word applying to Hodaka. Did the fact that Hodaka was always at home mean he had been waiting for Toya? Hodaka

hadn't invited him anywhere because he believed Toya when he said that he was busy. But it had been so long ago that he'd told Hodaka he couldn't take any vacation, he'd forgotten about it.

"No—"

"I told you I don't lie."

Kissing Toya's eyelids once again, Hodaka's lips dried the tears at the corners of Toya's eyes.

Before, Toya had thought of Hodaka as awkward. But Hodaka was much more honest and pure than Toya had imagined. Since Hodaka had revealed that to him, Toya had no idea what to do. It would be wrong to think of it as cute.

"But I'm not—"

Toya wasn't brilliantly talented or beautiful, like Hodaka. He didn't have money or social standing. He had always been afraid of being tossed aside, of being told he was no longer needed. But he still wanted to be with Hodaka. The man enflamed him and Toya wanted to monopolize him. He knew he was forgetting his place, but Toya kept drowning in his bottomless love. Fighting hard to keep his voice from shaking, Toya meekly confessed these thoughts to Hodaka.

"There's value in you just being yourself. It's the same value as the fact that there's only one of me in the world. No one else can replace you. At least, not in my opinion," Hodaka said.

"Th-then what about that woman? Why were you looking for a wedding hall?"

"You mean Miss Toyama from Six Winds? It was research for my next novel," Hodaka's voice whispered

gently against Toya's ear. His answer filled Toya. "But you broke your promise to me. You saw that man outside of work."

"But you're the only one I love, sir. I would never sleep with anyone but you."

Toya, too, had been guilty of not trusting his lover. He couldn't believe that someone like Hodaka really loved him, even at the bottom of his heart. That doubt had helped to put a brake on his mindless devotion to Hodaka.

"You didn't trust me."

"Well, you didn't trust me, either." Toya pouted, digging his nails into Hodaka's shoulders.

"Then we were both wrong."

Ever since Toya realized that he loved Hodaka, he had been lost inside emotions he had never experienced before. He could doubt the man without losing faith in love because he realized that lies and deceit exist in the world. He had started to doubt his lover, to feel jealousy, and sometimes even hatred.

Perhaps that was because their love had been born from such a sinful betrayal. The love that had dropped into his lap was stained with guilt from its very beginning.

Had Hodaka experienced the same suffering?

"Please trust me from now on," Toya said.

Hodaka gave a vague smile and asked, "Is there anything else you want?"

Faced with the question, Toya had nothing left to ask.

"Please just love me," Toya whispered in a barely

audible voice. "Love me as much as you can." If Hodaka did, Toya would devote all his love to him.

"Just be yourself and drive me crazy."

Toya had put up with selfishness and excess. If that was what it took to be with Hodaka, then Toya was fine with that.

"You don't want it to be physical?" Hodaka asked.

"It's good to have both. Love me with all of your heart and all of your body," Toya said quickly, wanting to blush at his own words. Hodaka shrugged easily.

"You're so adorable," Hodaka laughed furtively, and then continued. "You forget who you belong to sometimes, don't you? So I need to use your body. Then I think you'll remember. That you belong to me...and that I belong to you."

Those words were the best way to make Toya happy.

"And sometimes I don't need a reason to want to touch you. So why don't you take your clothes off, Toya? Let me make sure you still belong to me."

As obedient as if he were under a spell, Toya pulled off his jacket, unbuttoned his shirt, and then pulled that off too. Hodaka's hands peeled away his underwear until soon his weak flesh was exposed. Hodaka took Toya onto his lap. He lathered up some soap and rubbed it over Toya's skin.

"That tickles."

"First we have to get the smell of that other man off of you."

When Hodaka's fingers passed over Toya's skin,

bubbles bloomed in their trail. His caresses became ticklish and intoxicated Toya's heart.

"Mm!"

"You can't let this excite you. I'm punishing you."

"But it's—mm."

It was impossible to interpret the gentle motion of Hodaka's fingers as punishment since Toya was held in their thrall. While Hodaka's palms circled over his skin, his body grew helplessly warmer. His loins, swathed in glowing warmth, pulsed with pleasure. His entire body was suffused by an aching bliss.

"Do you want more?"

"Mm—"

Toya's grunted response to Hodaka's invitation made the man chuckle. "Tell me. What do you want me to do and where?"

"Touch me—lick me. I want you to fill me up so no part is empty."

Closing his eyes, Toya recited the sum of his desire. He knew that the more he hesitated, the more Hodaka would pull away from him.

"Ah—mm."

"Did you let him touch you everywhere?"

"Ow! Don't—don't pinch me."

Hodaka was crushing Toya's cherry nipples with the flat of his fingers. It hurt.

"Look how hard they are. I barely even touched them, and they're ready for more."

"Nngh—ah! He—he never touched them!"

"Did you rub them yourself then? Get yourself all

excited?" Hodaka laughed.

"No, you're wrong! I didn't!"

Toya was sopping wet, lewdly enticing Hodaka with his tense cries. He already felt himself relaxing inside. His penis had taken on its new shape; slimy drops of nectar spilled from it, the fountainhead of his lust plump and overflowing.

"If you don't behave, I won't be able to clean you," Hodaka teased, seeing Toya's hips begin to move. But Toya couldn't bring his excited body under control.

"No—no!"

"You want me to cover you with my smell instead?" Hodaka whispered, reaching out a hand to wrap gently around Toya's penis, his other hand flicking over the tip teasingly.

"Mm!"

"You like it when it hurts, don't you?" As Hodaka asked that, he reached down with his right hand to play with Toya's organ, thick with his passion.

"Angh! You're so mean—!"

Toya could tell the quality of Hodaka's clothes just from the sensation of the cloth rubbing across his skin. But it didn't feel good. He just wanted to feel the heat of Hodaka's body—skin against skin.

"No! Stop it! Ah!"

Toya's gasps were nearly screams, coquettish begging. He clung to the shirt on Hodaka's back, shaking his head again and again.

"What's wrong?"

"Take them off."

"Hm?"



Throwing his weight forward, Toya escaped the restraint of Hodaka's arms, twisting his body away. He put his hands on the buttons of Hodaka's shirt, undoing them one by one with trembling fingertips.

"Sir—"

As Hodaka's wicked fingers stole toward Toya's entrance, the simple task of unbuttoning a shirt eluded Toya. He buried his face in Hodaka's shoulder, crying.

"Do it now," Toya said.

"Not yet."

"Why? Why not?"

Hodaka was cruelly rubbing around Toya's sensitive bud, gradually pushing his finger into the gently yawning flesh.

"What are you doing with your hands? Just take it off for me."

It wasn't easy to pull off the man's shirt, heavy with water, but at last Toya exposed Hodaka's upper body, revealing his thin, supple muscles.

Lightly kissing the skin of Hodaka's chest, Toya brought his lips to his lover's collarbone. Hodaka's smell was lost, engulfed in the scent of soap. But Toya didn't mind. It was hard to tell whether his body was wet from his sweat, from the fluids of his excitement, or from the shower raining over them. Toya took shallow, panting breaths as he sought out Hodaka's lips. Hodaka smirked at the sight.

"Why don't I take you now? Get down on all fours."

Kneeling, Toya turned his tiny, lewdly shuddering backside toward Hodaka.

Hodaka locked against his hips quickly.

"Ah! Mm!"

A sensation of tearing suffused Toya's body.

"Relax for me, if you haven't forgotten how."

"Ah! Mm—nngh."

Hodaka's hardness plunged into the narrow space, penetrating Toya deeply. When Hodaka brushed the most sensitive part of Toya's body, Toya climaxed pitifully, sticky fluid spattering the floor tiles. Toya had begun to whimper. His body was not yet satisfied and he wiggled his hips, pulling the man deeper inside with his hunger.

"You're so loose."

"Because you're inside me."

Hodaka had trained Toya's body. Toya had never experienced any man but Hodaka, so his body wasn't as experienced as some. Bent down on the tiles without any padding, his palms and kneecaps ached as they pressed against the hard floor. Once in a while, Toya winced at the feeling of his flesh pinched between bone and tile.

"Oh—does it hurt?"

Hodaka had noticed Toya's expression. He spread his shirt across the tiles and ordered Toya to kneel on that instead. At the same time, Hodaka became more restrained, which only made Toya impatient. He twisted his head back and begged Hodaka in his most sensual voice. "Ah! M—more! Go deeper!"

"Like this?"

The man's pace grew quicker and the lewdness of his rhythm transformed Toya's body into nothing more than a tool to pursue his pleasure.

“Yeah—mm! Nngh!”

Toya never wanted to be separated from Hodaka again. He never wanted to leave. He didn't know what he would do if he left Hodaka. He felt like he would cease to be himself.

“Guh—nngh! Sir!”

Tasting its limits, Toya's body ran obediently toward its second discharge and Toya tensed his limbs. Without any conscious decision, his body clamped down fiercely on Hodaka in the same instant that the man ejaculated.

Bringing his breathing back under control, Toya's body slowly relaxed and Hodaka pulled his shaft out. As if begrudging his departure from the place that had connected them, Toya's messy body clung to Hodaka, bringing Toya an even more intense echo of pleasure.

“That was so good...” Toya gasped. Heat lingered at the edges of his body. Lying limply on the tile floor, he turned his wet face up to look at Hodaka through lidded eyes. Hodaka smirked at him.

“Done already?”

“But—”

It had been so long. If they did much more, Toya might get hurt.

“It's better once you get warmed up,” Hodaka said, pressing a gentle kiss to Toya's temple.

He lifted Toya's body easily and slipped him into the bath. The bathtub was big enough that Toya could stretch his legs out completely and still have room left over. The lukewarm water lapped against his skin. Hodaka stripped away the last of his clothes and,

standing behind Toya, hugged him tightly.

“Oh!”

When a bulge of warmth struck his lower body, Toya knew that Hodaka wanted more. The mere contact began to slowly dissolve Toya's defenses. The part of him that knew obscene pleasure began to spasm shamelessly.

He loved Hodaka.

“Sir—come here.”

“I thought you were done.”

“No—I can't wait anymore,” Toya whispered in an entreating sigh.

“It won't be too hard for you if I keep going?” Hodaka never usually asked.

“I'll be fine.”

“Let me see you,” Hodaka murmured, spreading Toya's flesh and prying open his puckered folds. Toya reached behind him to take gentle hold of Hodaka's penis. The man was ready, engorged with blood. Toya pushed it against his own twitching flesh, and he was accosted by a deep, dizzying pleasure.

“Ah!”

Hodaka slid into his body. A trickle of water slightly warmer than Toya's body temperature flowed in with him. Toya's eyes widened at the strange sensation. But Hodaka was unconcerned, pushing his way further and further inside, maintaining a steady pace to guarantee the pleasurable sensation.

“Mm—nngh! Ah! Ah!”

Skewered by Hodaka's member, Toya felt as if the swollen membranes inside his body would break. He was

dominated by Hodaka. The sensation of Hodaka rubbing against his inner walls only brought Toya pleasure. He knew how despicable and perverted he was to abandon himself to his lust, but his heart was filled with a violent ache that threw his soul into chaos.

"You swallowed that right up," Hodaka said, his voice ever so slightly hoarse. The perversity of it pierced Toya's heart painfully.

"Because I-I remembered you."

"You remembered me?"

"You fill me, sir—every part of me."

Toya's gently loosened walls knew nothing but Hodaka.

"Like this?"

Hodaka drew Toya's hips down sharply and Toya rocked his head, gasping.

"Mm! Ahh!"

Without thinking, Toya dug his nails into Hodaka's hands as they gripped his slender waist, scratching him.

"What a bad boy," Hodaka whispered, easily lifting Toya's hips and roughly pulling his shaft out.

"No!"

Toya's flesh shuddered, mourning the sudden loss of its satisfaction. Toya twisted his head, crying out in protest.

"Look at me," Hodaka ordered, turning Toya around. "If you want that thing you keep squeezing, you have to say it."

Toya tried to charm Hodaka by wrapping his hands around the man's neck. While he searched for what to say, he was shocked to feel something hard press



against him and suddenly thrust back inside him.

“Aangh!”

“That’s amazing. I can’t believe it all went in at once,” Hodaka murmured as he took Toya’s penis in one hand, stroking it smoothly.

“Nngh—that feels so—so good!”

Toya had been trained to speak when he was excited. And at times like that, Toya was terribly submissive. Hodaka wouldn’t play with his rapidly growing erection, but instead rubbed it between their bodies. Toya couldn’t withstand the unpredictable sensation, but he allowed Hodaka to do it anyway.

“Do you want me to touch it?”

“I want to come with you.”

Toya wanted to climax just from the feeling of Hodaka inside him. His slick walls hugged Hodaka, overwhelming Toya with pleasure and threatening to drive him crazy.

“Are you ready, too, sir?”

Instead of an answer, Hodaka nibbled slightly on Toya’s ear. Toya bubbled with laughter; “I’m so happy.”

“You’re happy to let a man violate you like this?”

“It feels so good—”

The greater part of Toya’s consciousness had already soared somewhere far away. He no longer had any idea what he was saying. Hodaka’s rhythm pounded into him. He wanted to shatter into a million pieces. Then they would never have to be apart again.

“Ahh! Nngh!”

“You like it when I do that?” Hodaka asked, pulling out then smoothly pushing back in.

Toya could do nothing but nod while his face was covered with tears. “I do. I-I love it.” Toya breathed these words again and again, seeking out Hodaka’s lips. “Go further—further. I want to be dirty!”

“I can’t. That would hurt you.”

Despite Hodaka’s protests, he pounded Toya’s body with a speed tinted with desperation.

“Oh! Nngh! I’m going to—!”

When Hodaka thrust into that most intimate part of him, Toya couldn’t help but talk dirty.

“You’re going to what?”

“Mm—I’m coming—I-I’m—!”

As Toya erupted, he clung tightly to Hodaka, seeking a kiss.

“I can’t do any more.”

Toya was leaning back against Hodaka’s chest as they sat on the bed, his naked arm trailing from the sleeve of his bathrobe and stroking Hodaka’s hair.

“No one said you had to,” Hodaka muttered with an almost blunt indifference, tightening his arms around Toya as if he would never let him go again. He pressed his lips against Toya’s hair, which smelled of shampoo.

Toya was thirsty and reached out for a glass of mineral water, but Hodaka picked it up for him and gently pressed the glass to his lips. It dripped a bit and water leaked from the corners of Toya’s mouth, trailing down his throat and washing over the remnants of Hodaka’s kisses. Hodaka took a silent drink from the

glass as well and then brought his lips to Toya's. He passed the water, which had taken on some of his body heat, into Toya's mouth. They exchanged several more mouthfuls.

Toya smiled childishly as these kisses that were meant to cool him down actually enflamed him. He reached out to touch Hodaka's face with his fingertips and Hodaka smiled.

"Is that finally enough for you?"

"I just want to say that I've never slept with any man but you."

"The more you try to convince me, the more it sounds like a lie," Hodaka whispered teasingly in his ear. Toya didn't know how to feel about that.

"The only reason I keep talking about it is because you never believe me."

"Maybe because you took time off to go on a vacation with Amano."

Toya gasped. How did Hodaka know about that? Amano had promised not to tell anyone.

Hodaka smirked. "No matter how secretive you are, if I need to know, I'll find out."

Seeing Toya sinking further into thought, Hodaka finally took pity on him.

"Makihara told me you'd taken time off, and when I called your cell phone, Amano answered."

"What?"

"He said you were too drunk to pick up. He didn't sound happy about answering."

Now that Hodaka reminded him of that night, it was entirely possible that there had been a missed call.

Toya wasn't in the habit of checking his call history, so he hadn't noticed.

"I knew that boy was overconfident and that he'd fallen in love with you. You might have been swept away."

"But I had to work with Mister Amano."

"You were working with me when you slept with me."

"But...that was because it was you." Toya pouted, glowering at Hodaka through his eyelashes. "Mister Amano wasn't established in our department, so I wouldn't be able to justify a business trip with him. I had to take some vacation days instead. It was just a research trip."

"But you didn't have any vacation to spare for me?"

That didn't sound like Hodaka. The implication of his words finally made Toya realize that Hodaka had been a little jealous.

"I just wanted to improve my record. I didn't want people to think that I was acting inappropriately. It would be bad if it looked like you were doing me favors, since we're lovers."

"The fact that you even thought of that is proof that you're acting inappropriately."

"What does that mean?"

"Why should I care if you're incompetent? It doesn't matter to me. That problem comes before me doing you any favors," Hodaka said harshly. "You can come see me whenever you want and I'll even do whatever you want. Because you let me touch you."

That's all the reward I need."

Sneaky. Hodaka only acted nice at times like that, when Toya brooded.

"Then I wish you'd listened to me, sir. I would have told you everything. I would have told you that you're the only one."

Hodaka didn't answer.

Was he afraid? The thought crossed Toya's mind suddenly. But Hodaka always said that Toya's body was more honest than his heart. Even during sex, Hodaka had never once asked him if he had slept with Amano, or even if he liked Amano.

It would have been his fear that prevented him from investigating Toya's betrayal by exploiting his body, which was so weak to pleasure. He was afraid that Toya had betrayed him.

"I'm sorry," Toya murmured, sitting up and wrapping his arms around Hodaka.

"About what?"

Hodaka must have been terrified of being betrayed, since he hated lies and betrayal himself. It must have been so hard for him. Hodaka was much more cowardly and naïve than Toya had realized. That man, who had grown up shrouded by loneliness, didn't really know how to interact with other people. Toya knew that better than anyone, but he had overlooked it. He had thought only about himself and hadn't taken the time to notice.

"About everything."

"Well, if you feel that way, maybe you'll consider a request."

"A request?"

"Would you accept my invitations to go out on dates sometimes?"

Toya's eyes widened at Hodaka's words. "But what if someone saw us?"

"I wouldn't care if someone did. Only if you don't mind, that is."

Hodaka's easy answer put Toya in an awkward position. Fine, he got it. It had been completely drilled in; Toya was always the sneakier one. He was calculating. But he just lacked courage. He didn't want his reputation to fall. He wanted to be considered competent at his job. That pride got in the way and made it impossible to be open in his love for Hodaka.

In choosing his love for Hodaka, Toya had wanted to abandon that calculating part of his personality, even to the point of betraying others. But then he had used his work as an excuse to ignore Hodaka's feelings. But he wouldn't run anymore. He wouldn't make any more mistakes.

"What's wrong? You don't want to go on dates?" Hodaka asked, growing suspicious of Toya's silence.

"It's not that. I just...want to be with you, sir."

If I'm allowed to be with the man I love so much, nothing can beat that joy.

Someday, their love would crumble and fade away. That knowledge made Toya want to treasure their love all the more while he still had it.

"That's enough for me," Toya murmured, kissing Hodaka's cheek.

"You kissed the wrong place."

Sealing Hodaka's lips once again, Toya smiled

despite himself. The kisses he shared with Hodaka were sweet and tender. They washed away all the guilt he carried.

The Guilty Before Brunch

Waking up later than he usually did, Kai Hodaka expected to find his lover Toya Sakurai sleeping beside him, but he was gone. A suspicious look crossed his face.

“Toya!” he called out as he sat up, but there was no response.

His spacious bedroom was perfectly clean. Hodaka’s aesthetic sense had designed every room in his apartment to be pleasant.

“Toya?” he called again. Since there was still no answer, Toya probably wasn’t in the bathroom just next to the bedroom.

Hodaka had been a little sadistic in tormenting Toya the night before. Had Toya gotten mad and gone home? Normally Toya was a mature, patient person, but sometimes he could be quite decisive. He was decisive enough to end their entire relationship after only a minor quarrel. Hodaka was comfortable with his lover’s unwavering resolve, but Toya had probably never noticed it since he still didn’t know himself very well.

Maybe that was why Toya was so special to Hodaka. In his thirty-odd years of life, Hodaka had never met anyone who threw his heart into such chaos. Hodaka knew that Toya was changing him, bit by bit. He

wouldn't bemoan that transformation, though. Instead he accepted the change and influence.

Hodaka climbed out of bed and walked into the master bathroom. As he'd suspected, Toya was not there. Hodaka washed his face and got dressed, and then went downstairs, concealing the sound of his footsteps. He heard noises in the kitchen and peeked inside. Hodaka had given the maid the day off before Toya had come to stay the night, so he knew it wasn't her.

Naturally, it was Toya. Hodaka was inexplicably relieved by that. He wasn't sure if he should announce his presence or not. Hodaka was feeling playful, and just for fun, he stood in the doorway of the kitchen, watching Toya. He could have hidden, but he didn't want to bother. He decided he would watch his lover for a while, unobserved.

Toya managed to start the coffee maker, but then wasn't sure what to do next. He peered into the fridge, counted the eggs, picked up the lettuce, and stared. The energy alert on the fridge had been beeping for several seconds, but Toya didn't seem to notice it. He was gazing into the refrigerator with a baffled look on his face, deep in thought. When he finally noticed Hodaka's eyes on him, he jumped.

"Mister Hodaka!"

The embarrassment on Toya's face made Hodaka wonder if he'd been wrong to hide. Despite these doubts, Hodaka assumed a nonchalant attitude and curved his lips into a slight smile.

"Good morning, Toya."

"Good morning," Toya said, his voice sounding

somehow tense.

Toya was still dressed in his pajamas, looking at Hodaka in embarrassment while he smiled. Hodaka drew up to him, wrapping his arms around Toya's body and planting a kiss on his forehead.

"Were you cataloguing the contents of my refrigerator?"

"Of course not."

Toya sounded like he was avoiding talking about something. Hodaka turned a suspicious gaze on him. Was Toya thinking about someone else? Hodaka could only think of one person who Toya wouldn't want to talk about in front of him.

Hodaka had never felt jealous before. He found the new thought process unpleasant. Obviously he wasn't upset at Toya; rather, he was upset at himself for imagining something so ridiculous. Though he could count on one hand the number of times Toya had woken up before him, even he thought it was a pathetic reason to doubt Toya's faithfulness. He just wanted to know what Toya had been mulling over as he gazed into the refrigerator. He couldn't stop these feelings bubbling up inside him: jealousy, and something else that belonged to an entirely different sphere.

"Toya."

He hugged Toya's body closer, brushing his lips. It began as only a light kiss, but he took Toya's complete lack of resistance as permission and boldly slipped his tongue into his mouth. He could feel Toya's body through the fabric of his pajamas, flashing warmer.

"Mm."

Already a low cry escaped Toya and he began to writhe in Hodaka's arms. Hodaka ran his hands down Toya's back, tracing the line from the base of his neck, past his shoulder blades, and down to his buttocks. Their lips locked, Hodaka began to massage Toya's backside. He felt a muffled burst of air slip through the gap between their lips.

"Sir—" Toya called him, his voice slightly dazed.

But Hodaka wasn't paying any attention. He pressed once more against Toya's lips, setting out to conquer the damp flesh of his mouth.

"Nngh!"

Hodaka's tongue sought deeply into Toya's mouth, mingling their saliva. He ran it over the sensitive roof of Toya's mouth, making Toya's entire body shiver. As they kissed, Hodaka stopped massaging Toya's buttocks and moved his hand up to Toya's chest, sweeping over his timid nipples. He could feel Toya's two tiny buds thrusting almost painfully through the cloth of his pajamas.

"Ah! S-sir!"

Toya's reticent cries of resistance drove Hodaka wild. Hodaka pulled his face away slowly and Toya looked back up at him with hazy, glistening eyes, his moist lips trembling.

"Why did you do it?" Hodaka asked.

"What?"

"You got up earlier than me."

Hodaka tweaked Toya's nipples through his shirt as he talked. Toya let out a small gasp, twisting his body away.

"Do I...have to tell you?"

"Yes."

Hodaka's voice had grown harsh, and even as Toya hung his head, his lips pursed tightly. But Hodaka had no intention of interrogating him. It was simply a tender ritual to build each other's excitement.

"Maybe I should rephrase the question?" Hodaka whispered, pushing Toya against the sink. Hodaka gently pushed against Toya's genitals with his thigh and resumed kissing him.

"Sir, I—"

"I think this will make you a little more cooperative."

"Ungh!"

Even without that, Hodaka's gentle caresses seemed to be exciting Toya; he was already getting harder. Soft cries escaped him as he began to relinquish power. Toya's disheveled breathing came gradually faster from his slightly open lips and Hodaka found it strangely endearing.

"Ah!"

Hodaka jerked off Toya's pajama pants and underwear in one quick motion and began toying with the sticky, wet organ he found within. Toya's cries became even more luscious.

"Ah! Mm!"

Unable to restrain himself, Toya pushed his arousal through Hodaka's fingers. His sex was rigid, thick with heat. That satisfied Hodaka.

"You're enthusiastic today."

Accepting the full force of Hodaka's taunting

words, Toya nodded his head vaguely. He was easily shamed and didn't like being teased when he was in such a state. Even though Toya knew that it only increased his pleasure, he always pretended he didn't know and struggled to keep it hidden. Hodaka found that inconsistent earnestness to be one of Toya's most endearing qualities.

"But—"

"Is it because of how I teased you yesterday?"

"Mm." Toya nodded quickly.

Hodaka fondled Toya's desire, wet with eagerness, and then he spun Toya around to face the other way. He dragged a finger over the tight and tiny folds between Toya's cheeks.

"Should I let you warm up?"

There were many things in the kitchen they could use for lube to make it easier. But Toya shook his head admirably. "I'm fine."

As if excited by Toya's seductive offer and his hoarse, paper-thin voice, Hodaka pressed his hardness against Toya.

"Nngh!"

Toya's body welcomed Hodaka, warm and smooth. The night before, too, Toya had devoured Hodaka's entire length, trembling with lust as he drew his lover in easily.

"Sir—!" Toya's strained voice confessed his pleasure. His slender fingers trembled as they gripped the edge of the sink. All it did was spur Hodaka's lust further.

"Toya."

Just calling his name made Toya's inner walls tighten, constricting deliciously around Hodaka.

"Is it good?"

"Yeah. Mm—yeah. It's really good," Toya answered ecstatically.

"You're so tight."

"Ah! Angh! I-I'm coming!" Toya panted, calling out to Hodaka once more.

Knowing how badly Toya wanted him, Hodaka came into his body.

Toya huddled weakly in the kitchen. Hodaka reached out a hand to help him stand and they moved into the living room. Laying his head on Hodaka's lap, Toya voiced his first words of protest.

"You're awful, sir."

"Why?" Hodaka asked innocently, and Toya flushed all the way to the base of his neck.

"For what you did back at the hotel."

Warmth spread through Hodaka's heart as Toya stumbled to express himself. Combing Toya's soft hair, Hodaka replied nonchalantly.

"What choice did I have? You wouldn't talk to me like a good boy."

At some point at the hotel, Toya had fallen into a daze, so they were both equally guilty.

"But you were never going to ask me, were you?" Toya asked, his voice slightly hoarse. Hodaka gave a slight smile.

So Toya knew all along.

"Well, you were never going to tell me, were you?"

Toya laughed loudly at Hodaka's retort. He looked away, unsure how to reply.

"In the kitchen, I was just—"

"Just what?"

Toya had trouble going on, but Hodaka urged him to continue.

"I was—" Toya seemed to be asking permission to finish, his hesitant expression full of an almost monk-like sternness. Hodaka steeled himself for the possibility that Toya might suggest breaking up, that was how serious he looked.

"I was just wondering if you'd let me make breakfast."

"You want to make breakfast?"

Hodaka had expected so much worse that he almost sounded disappointed.

"Yes."

"Why?"

Hodaka reacted with uncharacteristic caution to Toya's unexpected request. Toya's gaze wandered as he struggled for a moment before responding.

"Because whenever I stay here, you always make breakfast for me, Mister Hodaka."

Toya sounded so embarrassed that Hodaka's eyes widened momentarily. Then he smiled.

"I'm sorry."

Toya must have been expecting Hodaka to make him breakfast. It hadn't occurred to Hodaka that Toya

might actually look forward to his cooking. He would have been hard pressed to call himself a good cook, so he couldn't quite understand why Toya enjoyed it.

Hodaka faced a dilemma, because if Toya wanted something, that meant Hodaka would make it a reality. From then on, every time Toya stayed over, he would cook for him.

"I'll make breakfast for you in a few minutes," Hodaka murmured, pulling Toya close again.

"What?"

Well, it was almost time for lunch, but that wouldn't be a problem. Whatever Hodaka made for them, they had already tasted the most satisfying thing in the world.

"Right now, I want to snack on you. I'll cook after that."

"Just one more time," Hodaka whispered. Toya opened his mouth to say something, but Hodaka sealed his thin lips once more. He tasted deeply of the rare creature that allowed him alone, in all the world, to enjoy it.

THE GUILTY

Vol.3

Redemption

Spring 2009

Postscript

Hello, I'm Katsura Izumi.

I want to thank you for choosing this reissued edition of *The Guilty*.

This is the second volume of the *Guilty* series. It's written so that even people who haven't read the first volume can pick it up here, but since that volume is already available in a reissued novel format, why not get the entire collection to enjoy?

The drama CD of the first book is on sale now, too. If you listen to this, I guarantee you will get a lot mushier from Hodaka's insults and realize just how sexy Toya is.

If I remember, the first volume was the first time I tried writing an explicit sex scene. Then I realized that this book is the first time I've used the word "erotic" in my postscript. Despite all the torrid sex scenes in the first book, I was still too shy to use the word "erotic." Really, I still don't use that word very often, even though I use words like it in my sexy scenes. (laugh)

I put a lot of effort into the sex scenes in volume two. Reading back over it now, I'm surprised at how hard I was trying at the time. When I thought about

how the first time I really tackled doing (censored!) in my own way, I realized that was also in this book. I got really nostalgic. That moved me very deeply!

This volume also features the debut of Amano, one of my favorite characters, and it's chock-full of a lot more varied elements than in the first book.

And I decided to ride back over the old familiar ground of Hodaka's cooking for the epilogue I wrote for the republication. I just love the idea that this seemingly perfect man has this inherent fault, so I don't think he's going to get any better at cooking any time soon. Toya might find it pathetic, but he's got enough to keep him happy. I'm sure he'll be fine with it. (laugh)

I want to thank Hinako Takanaga for her gorgeous illustrations, and everyone at the publisher's from the bottom of my heart.

And I want to express my gratitude to all of you who have chosen my book. I hope to see you again in volume three of *The Guilty* series. And check out the drama CD of volume one if you get a chance!

I've published another book with Daria Bunko called *Sweet Seduction*. This book is fun in a different way from the *Guilty* series, so if you're interested, give it a try!

Until we meet again,
Katsura Izumi

* For information about professional and unofficial publications, please check the site:
<http://www.k-izumi.jp/>



Congratulations
on the reissue of
THE GUILTY,
Miss Izumi!

I'm thrilled I got to do the illustrations for Miss Izumi's book again! I'm a big fan of Mister Hodaka's, so I was very happy to get to play with him again. I really enjoyed him as a reader. Thank you so much! My addiction to him might have gotten worse—I drew him way too big to write anything. Do you guys mind?

...Sorry, what? Anyway, I put Miss Izumi and the editing staff to a lot of trouble this time around. Sorry about that! I was too weak. I just hope my drawings don't destroy the world Miss Izumi created for you all!